

TAIWAN LEADER CALLS FOR CALM OVER PENSION REFORM CHAOS



TAIPEI: Government employees walk between barricades erected outside the parliament during an anti-pension reform demonstration. —AFP

TAIPEI: Taiwan's leader called for calm after violent protests over pension reforms outside parliament yesterday saw scores of demonstrators scuffling with police and politicians. The rallies were staged as parliament began reviewing controversial bills which are designed to stop the struggling pension system from collapsing but are expected to hit nearly 500,000 civil servants and teachers.

Several lawmakers and politicians said they were pushed, punched and had water splashed on them as they tried to enter the legislative complex in central Taipei, which was guarded by barbed-wire barricades and a heavy police presence. President Tsai Ing-wen vowed to press ahead with the changes despite a recent string of protests and said her government would not tolerate violence.

"Intentionally causing conflicts will not deter the government's determination for reforms... our urgent task is to bring the pension system back from the brink of bankruptcy," she told reporters. Anger has been

mounting among public-sector workers and retirees as the government unveiled draft bills aimed at reducing their pensions and phasing out a special savings rate for them which pays 18 percent interest. The government has warned that various pension funds are likely to go bankrupt within three to 14 years unless the system is overhauled.

Seized the podium

More than 100,000 civil servants, teachers and servicemen demonstrated last year against the planned reforms—the largest street protest since Tsai became president. There was also chaos inside parliament yesterday as opposition lawmakers temporarily seized the podium and demanded the government hold public hearings on the issue. The pension issue is the latest challenge to Tsai, who has seen her popularity ratings fall rapidly since taking the helm in May last year as her government tackles a range of domestic issues—from gay marriage to judicial reform.

The Pension Reform Oversight Alliance,

an organizer of Wednesday's protests, criticized the government's "rough and irresponsible" methods and vowed to stage bigger demonstrations. "The Tsai government blames us but it is their incompetence that is forcing many people, not just civil servants and teachers, to take to the streets," said Lee Lai-hsi, a spokesman for the alliance.

Last December parliament plunged into chaos with opposing lawmakers brawling in the chamber while labour activists set off smoke bombs outside in protest at proposed holiday cuts. Taiwan's parliament, once notorious for its mass brawls, had been relatively peaceful under the previous government, except for fights over a contentious China trade pact and a new nuclear plant. Taiwan's pension schemes vary for different occupations. Public-sector retirees typically receive more generous packages than other workers. The government also aims to improve the pension system for around 10 million non-public sector workers in its reform bills. —AFP

PENCE VOWS 'OVERWHELMING' RESPONSE TO NORTH KOREA

'STORM CLOUDS GATHER ON THE HORIZON'

YOKOSUKA: The United States will counter any North Korean attack with an "overwhelming and effective" response, Vice President Mike Pence vowed yesterday, as he stood on the deck of a massive American aircraft carrier docked in Japan. Donald Trump's deputy is in the region to reassure allies fretting over Pyongyang's quickening

growing. Aboard the USS Ronald Reagan, the vice president, adopting a Churchillian tone, told troops he was there as "storm clouds gather on the horizon" of Northeast Asia. "North Korea is the most dangerous and urgent threat to peace and security in the Asia-Pacific," Pence said. But, "we will defeat any attack and meet any

in Japan and South Korea, who would be at the sharp end of any North Korean response. Seoul, the South Korean capital, is just 35 miles (56 km) away from the military demarcation line that splits the Korean peninsula, and is within easy range of North Korean long-range artillery. The Ronald Reagan, whose home port is Yokosuka in

the Vinson was "on her way up" to the peninsula, while Trump said an "armada" had been dispatched, adding fuel to already rising tensions. But a defence official told AFP on Tuesday that the group of ships was still off the northwest coast of Australia and would soon begin heading to the Sea of Japan (East Sea). But it would not arrive until next week at the earliest given the vast distance.

At the time of the strike group's deployment, many media outlets reported the ships were moving towards North Korea, suggesting a looming showdown, when in fact they had temporarily headed in the opposite direction. Wearing a green flight jacket, Pence also sought to reassure jittery allies who have seen Trump call into question decades-old mutual defence treaties of America's commitment.

The United States, Pence said, would be unwavering in its alliances and unyielding in its resolve. In a veiled warning to China, Pence added that "our treaty (with Japan) covers all the territory administered by Japan, including the Senkaku Islands—a disputed and uninhabited archipelago in the East China Sea that is controlled by Japan but claimed by Beijing. There was also a warning to China regarding the South China Sea, where Beijing has built reefs and islets into fortified islands capable of hosting military assets to bolster its claim to sovereignty over the sea.

Pence said the United States would defend the right to freedom of navigation through the waterway, one of the most important shipping channels on the planet. He also vowed that more of America's most advanced military assets would be deployed to the Asia-Pacific. About 47,000 US troops are stationed in Japan and a further 28,000 are in South Korea. —AFP



PYONGYANG: In this April 15, 2017, file photo, soldiers march across Kim Il Sung Square during a military parade in Pyongyang, North Korea, to celebrate the 105th birth anniversary of Kim Il Sung, the country's late founder and grandfather of current ruler Kim Jong Un. —AP

missile program, and its apparent readiness to carry out another banned nuclear test in its quest to develop an atomic weapon that can hit the US mainland.

Pence, whose visit started in South Korea the day after the failed launch by North Korea of what analysts said could have been a new missile, described the threat from the isolated regime as

use of conventional or nuclear weapons with an overwhelming and effective American response."

Pence's comments come after a senior North Korean official warned the regime had no intention of dialing down its missile program, pledging weekly tests and threatening "all-out war" if the US took any action against it. That kind of rhetoric has unnerved allies

Japan, is part of the Seventh Fleet and is regularly deployed around the western Pacific.

Treaty allies

The Navy had said earlier this month that a strike group led by the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson had been ordered to "sail north" as a warning to Pyongyang. Pentagon chief Jim Mattis also said

CHINA: INTERPOL NOTICE ISSUED FOR BILLIONAIRE GUO WENGUI

BEIJING: China's foreign ministry said yesterday that Interpol has issued a "red notice" seeking the arrest of Guo Wengui, a Chinese billionaire who has threatened to expose corruption at the highest levels of the ruling Communist Party. Foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang gave no details about Guo's alleged crimes when announcing the Interpol notice.

The real estate tycoon disappeared from public view in 2014 but resurfaced in recent months, claiming in two interviews with overseas Chinese media and a stream of Twitter posts that he held damning information about party elites. Guo's case has been closely followed by Chinese political watchers, who say his leaks could be potentially damaging as internal factions jostle for power in the months leading up to the 19th Party Congress expected this fall, when a new generation of party leaders will be chosen.

Guo has been linked to Ma Jian, a former deputy head of China's intelligence service who was charged with corruption in February. He is believed to be in the U.S. or Britain, two countries that do not have extradition treaties with China. In brief messages to The Associated Press on Wednesday, Guo dismissed the Interpol notice as an empty threat from the Chinese leadership. "It's all lies, all threats," Guo said. "It shows they are scared of me leaking explosive information." He added: "Don't worry, this is a good thing."

Guo was not listed on Interpol's website and agency officials declined com-

ment, saying that Interpol does not comment on specific cases without the agreement of the member country involved as a matter of policy. A "red notice" for Guo would revive concerns over the election of a top Chinese police official as Interpol's president in November. Rights advocates had warned that the abuses and lack of transparency within China's legal system meant there was the potential for Interpol to be misused to attack Beijing's political opponents.

Political instrumentalization

"Our warnings about the risk of political instrumentalization of Interpol after putting high ranking (Chinese Communist Party) official at the top were not overblown," Nicholas Bequelin, Amnesty International's regional director for East Asia, wrote yesterday on Twitter. He noted that Guo had recently given an interview to the New York Times in which he repeated his claims to have evidence of corruption among high-ranking officials.

A "red notice" issued by the Lyon, France-based International Criminal Police Organization is the closest instrument to an international arrest warrant in use today. Interpol circulates those notices to member countries listing people who are wanted for extradition. China has sought to enlist Interpol in its ongoing campaign to capture Chinese officials and business people accused of corruption who have fled abroad.

Returning those suspects to China is

part of President Xi Jinping's broader campaign against corruption in the government and ruling party, which itself has raised questions about Xi's political motives. Guo said that earlier this week he and the US-government-funded Voice of America had received threats from Chinese agents warning them against releasing an interview in which he promised to dish information about Chinese leaders. The interview will be streamed late Wednesday in Beijing as planned, Guo said.

Despite his humble roots in the central province of Henan, Guo's transformation into a billionaire developer - and his bare-knuckle business tactics - have been the subject of sensational stories in domestic media. He reportedly worked with Ma, the disgraced intelligence chief, to obtain a sex tape of a deputy mayor of Beijing who blocked Guo's high-profile real estate project in 2006, leading to the city official's downfall.

At the center of Guo's recent corruption allegations are claims that relatives of He Guoqiang, a former member of Politburo Standing Committee, China's most powerful decision-making body, were secretly stakeholders in Founder Securities, a company that Guo sought unsuccessfully to purchase a stake in in 2014. Citing corporate registration documents and interviews with relatives, The New York Times reported earlier this month that He's family did indeed have extensive ties to Founder, substantiating at least some of Guo's claims. —AP



JAKARTA: Candidate for Jakarta governor, Anis Baswedan (L), his wife Fery Farhati Ganis (R) and daughter Mutiara Baswedan (C) gesture after casting their ballots. —AFP

CHRISTIAN GOVERNOR LOSES JAKARTA RUN-OFF: POLLSTERS

JAKARTA: Jakarta's Christian governor yesterday lost heavily to a Muslim former government minister in an election run-off, private polls indicated, after a divisive battle that has damaged Indonesia's reputation as a bastion of tolerant Islam. Anies Baswedan, who was accused of pandering to hardliners to win votes, and his supporters cheered as news came through that surveys showed him winning by over 10 percentage points against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, who was fighting for his job while standing trial for blasphemy.

Official results are not expected until early May but the private pollsters, who count a sample of votes, are usually accurate. The vote was seen as a test of whether the moderate Islam traditionally practiced in the world's most populous Muslim country is under threat from hardliners, who have led a series of mass demonstrations against Purnama over allegations he insulted the Koran.

It came against a backdrop of rising religious intolerance that has tainted the image of the diverse Indonesian archipelago as a pluralistic country in recent years, with a surge in attacks on minorities. Baswedan, a former education minister, thanked Jakarta's voters for supporting him and hinted that he would move to heal the divisions in the capital after the bitter poll, if his victory was confirmed.

"We celebrate diversity... We are all ready to work together again," the 47-year-old said. Purnama, the city's first non-Muslim governor for half a century and its first ethnic Chinese leader, congratulated Baswedan and his running mate, adding: "We are all the same, we want a good Jakarta, because it is our

home." The defeat is also a blow for President Joko Widodo, whose party had backed Purnama.

'Stay unified'

The incumbent had long been a shoo-in to win re-election after gaining popularity due to his determined efforts to clean up Jakarta. But the governor-known by his nickname Ahok-lost a once-unassailable lead after a controversy erupted last year over claims that he had insulted Islam, a grave charge in Indonesia. His troubles began in September when he lightheartedly said in a speech that his rivals were tricking people into voting against him by using a Koranic verse, which some interpret as meaning Muslims should only choose Muslim leaders.

The allegations drew hundreds of thousands of conservative Muslims onto the streets of Jakarta in major protests, and led to Purnama being put on trial for blasphemy in a case critics see as politically motivated. Purnama won in the election's first round in February but Baswedan was seen as the favourite in the run-off because the votes from a third, Muslim, candidate who was knocked out were expected to go to him.

Opinion polls in the run-up to the vote indicated that the race was neck and neck but in the event Baswedan strongly defeated Purnama, the pollsters indicated. They showed him with about 57 percent to Purnama on 43 percent. More than 7.2 million people were registered to vote in the polls, which are also important as politicians view them as a potential stepping stone to the presidency in 2019. —AFP

PHILIPPINE LEADER MAY LAUNCH 'INVASION' OF ABU SAYYAF ISLE

MANILA: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte warned yesterday he might "invade" an island stronghold of the Islamic State-linked Abu Sayyaf to "finish the game" following a thwarted attempt by the group to kidnap tourists on a resort island last week. Duterte offered cash rewards for the capture, dead or alive, of six Abu Sayyaf militants still at large following a day-long clash last week on Bohol island, which killed six rebels and four members of the security forces.

The shootout on Bohol followed warnings against travel to central Philippine islands by several Western countries, which cited unconfirmed intelligence of possible kidnap plans. The clash erupted after residents tipped-off authorities about the arrival of armed men on boats. The incident was highly significant, coming during Holy Week at a location far from Abu Sayyaf's traditional field of operations on remote Jolo, Tawi Tawi and Basilan islands. Duterte said Abu Sayyaf must not be allowed to extend its reach.

"I will, maybe, invade Jolo," Duterte told reporters after a security briefing in Tagbilaran City, Bohol. "All army, navy, will go there. It will be a fight. That's what

they want, I will give it." Referring to Abu Sayyaf's strongholds, he said: "They must stay there. My order to the navy ... is to blow them up, no surrender. Shoot cannons, destroy them." Abu Sayyaf has its roots in separatism and the military says some elements are in close contact with Islamic State radicals in the Middle East. However, most of its activities are banditry, like piracy and kidnap. It is notorious for beheading hostages when money for their release is not paid.

Duterte said he wanted civilians to support the manhunt on Bohol and offered a reward of 6 million pesos (\$120,668) for each of the six fugitives. He warned Abu Sayyaf might try to "create a disaster" at a meeting of trade officials of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Duterte said he wanted to arm civilians, and encouraged them to kill not only Abu Sayyaf, but drug addicts who were armed. Duterte's signature policy is a war on drugs, which has killed nearly 9,000 people in 10 months, mostly users and small-time peddlers. "My order is dead or alive ... My enemy is drugs and terrorists. These drug addicts, they have firearms. Almost all of them are really paranoid. They fight." —Reuters