

SRI LANKA NAVY RESCUES TWO ELEPHANTS WASHED OUT TO SEA

COLOMBO: Two young elephants washed out to sea were saved from drowning yesterday by the Sri Lankan navy in the second such incident off the island in as many weeks. The navy said the pair of wild elephants were brought ashore after a "mammoth effort" involving navy divers, ropes and a flotilla of boats to

tow them back to shallow waters. Photos showed the elephants in distress, barely keeping their trunks above water in the deep seas about one kilometre off the coast of Sri Lanka.

"Having safely guided the two elephants to the shore, they were subsequently released to the Foul Point jungle

(in Trincomalee district)," the navy said in a statement. "They were extremely lucky to have been spotted by a patrol craft which called in several other boats to help with the rescue." Two weeks ago, the navy mounted a similar operation in the same region to save a lone elephant washed eight kilometers off the Sri Lankan coast

into the deep waters of the Indian Ocean.

Navy officials say the animals were likely swept out while crossing shallow lagoons in the region. They are not the only wildlife to encounter trouble in the biodiverse island. In May, the navy and local residents saved a pod of 20 pilot whales that became stranded in

Trincomalee, a natural harbor that is popular for whale watching. The waters around Trincomalee, which were used by Allied forces as a staging post during World War II, have a high concentration of blue and sperm whales, while the surrounding jungles have herds of wild elephants. —AFP

CHINA CASHING OUT AS MOBILE PAYMENT SOARS

BEIJING: Yang Qianqian holds out her smartphone to scan a barcode on the mobile of a vendor selling fresh fruit and vegetables at a bustling outdoor market in Beijing. The dance student is part of an explosion in the use of mobile payment platforms in China as consumers increasingly take out phones instead of cash to pay for everything from a coffee to a language class or a gas bill.

"Even though I have cash on me it's not convenient to get it when I am carrying a lot of bags," said Yang, 25, clutching plastic bags filled with pears, potatoes and watermelon. China was the first country in the world to use paper money but centuries later the soaring popularity of mobile payment has some analysts forecasting it could be the first to stop.

The gross merchandise value of third party mobile payment rose more than 200 percent to 38 trillion yuan (about \$5.6 trillion) in 2016 from a year earlier, according to China-based iResearch. The growth of the cash-free system has been supported by China's rapidly expanding e-commerce market as Chinese shoppers increasingly shun bricks and mortar stores. "I think it's really very possible that China becomes the first or one of the first cashless societies in the next decade," said Ben Cavender, a director at China Market Research Group. Cavender estimates China's mobile payment market is already 40-50 times larger than the United States.

Cashless

Alipay, started by e-commerce giant Alibaba and now owned by its affiliate Ant Financial, and WeChat Pay, which is built into Tencent's popular messaging service, have hundreds of millions of users between them and are China's dominant payment platforms.

In Beijing it is hard to find a product or a service that cannot be purchased with a mobile. At the fresh produce market, stallholders display barcodes on tables laden with fruit and vegetables for customers like Yang to scan-though many shoppers appeared more comfortable with cash.

"People at my age don't dare to use it," said a woman in her 50s. Some restaurants in the capital no longer accept bank notes while it is common for motorbike taxis, street food carts and hair salons to offer mobile payment. Mobile accounted for eight percent of the total value of retail payments in 2015 and is expected to reach 12 percent in 2020, according to a report published in April by UN-backed Better Than Cash Alliance.

But cash is still king in China-although less so than it used to be. The Better Than

Cash Alliance expects cash's percentage of the value of retail payments to fall to 30 percent by 2020. It stood at 61 percent in 2010. A key attraction of mobile payment is convenience.

People can carry little or no cash and avoid the problem of their debit or credit card being rejected due to the limited number of point-of-sale terminals in stores. China's relatively short history of using bank cards also makes consumers more open to new technology, said Martin Utreras, vice president of forecasting at eMarketer. "In China a lot of people never had any financial instruments that were automated in any way and the first thing they had was mobile payment," he said.

'Hands off'

But some have been reluctant converts to the cashless system. Among them is a 63-year-old woman surnamed Song who sells hand-knitted sunflowers and peashooters from the popular video game Plants vs Zombies in a pedestrian underpass in Beijing. She prefers cash but accepts mobile payment because some customers do not carry real money. "Cash is more convenient for me because I'm getting older and have bad eyesight," she said, standing next to her bright-colored ornaments neatly displayed on the ground.

Riding on their success, payment providers are expanding their businesses to offer consumer and business credit scoring, short-term lending and even investment products. The shift fits with the Chinese government's domestic agenda of boosting consumer spending and increasing access to financial services among ordinary people.

Alibaba and Tencent are also taking their technology and deep pockets-abroad as they target cashed-up Chinese tourists and nascent payment markets in developing countries.

Tencent earlier this month teamed up with German payments company Wirecard to launch WeChat Pay in Europe where Alipay is already available. Security of mobile payment is a growing concern, however, after reports of criminals replacing real barcodes with fake ones carrying software that steals personal information or drains users' bank accounts.

Authorities are still working out "the right balance between innovation and regulation", according to Better Than Cash Alliance, but they have been "more active" in taking steps to reduce financial risk and fraud. "The government doesn't want to slow down adoption... that's why they have kept their hands off," said Cavender. —AFP



ANKARA: Vendors sell products featuring coup-victim Omer Halisdemir during the first anniversary of a failed coup attempt on July 16, 2017 at Taksim Square. —AFP

ERDOGAN TELLS GERMANY - DON'T INTERFERE IN ANY TURKISH AFFAIRS

LATEST BROADSIDE IN A BLISTERING ROW

ISTANBUL: Germany has no right to interfere in Turkey's domestic affairs, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said yesterday, his latest broadside in a blistering row sparked by the waves of arrests under the current state of emergency. Several German nationals are among those being held and Berlin has warned its citizens that their safety cannot be guaranteed in Turkey and that consular access is not assured in case of arrest.

Throwing away any pretence at diplomatic nuance, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel had Thursday also warned German firms against investment in Turkey and spoke of an "overhaul" of the entire relationship. "Turkey is a social democratic state based on law and no one has the right to interfere in its internal affairs," said Erdogan before heading off on a trip to the Gulf.

Addressing Gabriel's comments, he said: "We (Turkey and Germany) are together in NATO. We (Turkey) are in negotiations to join the EU. "So the strategic partnership between us is nothing

new. We have been partners for a long time. No step should be taken to overshadow this partnership," he added.

In an interview with the daily Bild, however, Germany's powerful finance minister, Wolfgang Schauble, warned Erdogan that he was "jeopardizing the centuries-old partnership between Turkey and Germany". "It is truly dramatic-there is actually so much that connects us. But we will not be blackmailed," he said, according to extracts of the interview to be published on Monday.

Public security

The German Chambers of Commerce and Industry (DIHK) estimated that the prevailing uncertainty would likely wipe two billion euros (\$2.3 billion) off bilateral trade, the Welt am Sonntag newspaper reported. Turkey remains under a state of emergency imposed days after last year's July 15 failed coup which critics claim

is being used to go after any opponent of Erdogan. The authorities say the emergency is needed for public security.

The latest crisis was precipitated by the order of a Turkish court to remand in custody a group of human rights activists detained on an island off Istanbul, including Amnesty International's Turkey director Ildi Eser and Berlin-based activist Peter Steudtner. But Berlin was already furious over the jailing in February of Deniz Yucel, Turkey correspondent for Die Welt newspaper, who Erdogan has personally denounced as a "terror agent".

Meanwhile, Turkey accuses Germany of not doing enough to deal with Kurdish militants and suspects from the failed coup who has taken refuge on its soil. Erdogan said Ankara had passed Berlin 4,500 dossiers on Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) suspects alone. Both Turkey and the EU as well as the US outlaw the PKK as a terror group. —AFP



BEIJING: This file photo shows a woman making purchases by scanning QR codes using her smartphone at a fruit stall in a market in Beijing. China was the first country in the world to use paper money but centuries later the soaring popularity of mobile payment has some analysts forecasting it could be the first to stop. —AFP

SYRIA STRIKES NEAR DAMASCUS DESPITE CEASEFIRE: MONITOR

BEIRUT: Syria's regime carried out air raids on one of the last rebel strongholds near Damascus yesterday, a monitor said, a day after it declared a ceasefire in parts of the besieged enclave. The Syrian army on Saturday announced a halt in fighting for parts of Eastern Ghouta, a rebel-held region on the outskirts of the capital that has been ravaged in the six-year conflict.

"Regime warplanes targeted the area of Ain Terma with at least six strikes since early morning, and two raids were carried out on and around the city of Douma," the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group said. The Britain-based monitor, which relies on sources in Syria for its information, did not report any casualties.

Regime shelling also hit the outskirts of the town of Jisreen on Sunday, the Observatory said, after regime artillery and rocket fire on areas including Ain Terma and the town of Harasta on Saturday after the ceasefire started. President Bashar Al-Assad's forces have surrounded the Eastern Ghouta

region for more than four years, and regime forces have regularly targeted the area.

Assad's forces have for weeks been fighting rebels on the outskirts of Ain Terma, which links Eastern Ghouta to opposition-held parts of the Damascus district of Jobar. Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman said no jihadist forces were present in the areas targeted by regime bombardment. The army announced a halt in fighting in areas of Eastern Ghouta on Saturday from midday local time, but did not say which areas exactly would be included.

The ceasefire announcement came after regime ally Russia said it had reached a deal with "moderate" rebels on the boundaries and policing of the safe zone. It said the sides had also agreed "routes to supply humanitarian aid to the population and for free movement of residents". But no rebel group yielding influence in Eastern Ghouta said they had signed that agreement. —AFP

HOW IT HAPPENED: HOLY SITE CRISIS

JERUSALEM: Eight people have been killed in a weekend of violence following new Israeli security measures at an ultra-sensitive Jerusalem holy site. Here is a timeline of events related to the crisis:

Attack and mosque shutdown

On July 14, three Arab Israelis armed with automatic rifles and a knife exit Jerusalem's Haram Al-Sharif compound, known to Jews as the Temple Mount, and shoot dead two police officers stationed nearby. The assailants flee back into the flashpoint holy site, which includes Al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock, before being shot dead by security forces.

Arab Israelis are descendants of Palestinians who remained on their land following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. They largely identify with the Palestinian cause. Israel then takes the highly unusual decision to shut down the compound, meaning Muslim worshippers cannot attend Friday prayers there the same day, triggering anger from Muslims and Jordan, the holy site's custodian. The site remains closed the next day, while parts of Jerusalem's Old City are under lockdown as Israel conducts searches for concealed weapons.

Metal detectors

Late on July 15, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announces the site will open the next day and security forces will install metal detectors and surveillance cameras to prevent further attacks. But when the compound opens on July 16 with metal detectors in place, Muslim worshippers refuse to enter due to the new security measures, which they perceive as a means for Israel to assert further control over the site. Prayers are instead held in the streets leading to the site. The compound is located in east Jerusalem, which was occupied by



JERUSALEM: Palestinian youths hurl stones towards Israeli police officers during clashes. —AFP

Israel in 1967 and later annexed in a move never recognized by the international community.

Clashes

From July 16 to 20, sporadic clashes break out after prayers. Muslim worshippers hold firm in their resolution to not enter the compound while the metal detectors remain in place as concerns rise over a possible escalation of the situation. On July 20, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan joins the Palestinian leadership in urging Israel to remove the metal detectors. But after consultations with the security establishment, Netanyahu decides to leave the metal detectors in place, though allows police to apply discretion in using them.

Friday eruption

Ahead of Friday prayers on July 21, Israeli police take the rare measure of closing off the Old City to men under 50. Mass protest prayers are held around Jerusalem's Old City and demonstrations there and in the occupied West Bank lead to clashes in which three Palestinians are killed. Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas says he is freezing contacts with Israel. Later the same day, a Palestinian breaks into a Jewish home in the settlement of Neve Tsuf in the West Bank and stabs four Israelis, killing three of them before being shot by a neighbor. The Israeli army says the assailant had spoken of the Jerusalem holy site and of dying as a martyr in a Facebook post.

More clashes

On July 22, clashes in east Jerusalem and the West Bank continue, resulting in the death of two Palestinians, including one when a petrol bomb explodes prematurely. Diplomats say the UN Security Council will hold closed-door talks two days later about the spiraling violence after Egypt, France and Sweden seek a meeting to "urgently discuss how calls for de-escalation in Jerusalem can be supported". On July 23, a rocket fired at Israel from Gaza hits an open area, causing no injuries. The Israeli cabinet convenes, with officials not ruling out removing the metal detectors if a satisfactory alternative to them is approved by police. —AFP