

AUSTRALIA ASYLUM-SEEKERS WIN MULTIMILLION DOLLAR PAYOUT

SYDNEY: Detainees at an Australian asylum-seeker camp in Papua New Guinea won millions of dollars in compensation for "degrading and cruel" treatment yesterday, in a decision hailed as an important human rights victory. Abuse, self-harm and mental health problems are reportedly rife in offshore processing centers, with detainees resorting to desperate protests like sewing their own lips together to raise awareness of their plight.

Wednesday's AU\$570 million (US\$53 million) conditional settlement, to be shared by 1,905 people who have been held on Manus Island since 2012, averted a public trial against the government and security providers Transfield and G4S. A class action had sought damages for what claimants said was suffering due to the harsh conditions in which they were held.

It also called for a payout for false imprisonment after the Papua New Guinea Supreme Court ruled last year that holding asylum-seekers on Manus Island was unconstitutional and illegal. Law firm Slater and Gordon said they believed it was the largest human rights class action settlement in Australian history, with the defendants also agreeing to pay more than AU\$20 million in costs. "The people detained on Manus Island have



MANUS ISLAND, Papua New Guinea: An undated handout file photo shows a man walking between tents at Australia's regional processing center. — AFP

endured extremely hostile conditions, but they will no longer suffer in silence," said the firm's Andrew Baker.

"While no amount of money could fully recog-

nize the terrible conditions the detainees endured, we hope today's settlement can begin to provide them with an opportunity to help put this dark chapter of their lives behind them." The Manus

detention facility opened in 2012 to hold people trying to enter Australia by boat, under a tough immigration policy that sends them offshore to be processed. They are blocked from resettling in Australia even if found to be refugees.

Conditions in the camp, and another one on Nauru in the Pacific, have been widely criticized by refugee advocates and medical professionals, with reports of maltreatment and neglect, leading to serious health problems. Amnesty International called the decision "historic" and "a major crack in the Australian government's crumbling system of abuse." "It must be a turning point towards a better solution for refugees - one that is grounded in protection, not abuse," said Amnesty Pacific researcher Kate Schuetze.

Prudent outcome

Immigration Minister Peter Dutton said the payout was not an admission of liability, but to avoid a costly six-month trial. "In such circumstances a settlement was considered a prudent outcome for Australian taxpayers," he said in a statement. "The Commonwealth strongly refutes and denies the claims made in these proceedings. Settlement is not an admission of liability in any regard." — AFP

SIBLINGS ACCUSE SINGAPORE PREMIER OF ABUSING POWER

BROTHER, SISTER SAY THEY FEEL THREATENED

SINGAPORE: A feud between the children of Singapore's late founding leader intensified yesterday after two siblings publicly accused their brother Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of disobeying their father's last wishes and abusing his powers. Singapore's founder Lee Kuan Yew is largely credited with transforming the city-state from a relatively poor British colony into one of the world's wealthiest and most stable societies.

His eldest son Hsien Loong became Singapore's third prime minister in 2004, taking over the People's Action Party (PAP) which has governed Singapore since it gained self-rule in 1959. "We have felt threatened by Hsien Loong's misuse of his position and influence over the Singapore government and its agencies to drive his personal agenda," read a statement posted online by younger brother Hsien Yang and younger sister Wei Ling.

It was an extraordinary public criticism of the city-state's top leadership in a country where tough laws against protests and curbs on press

freedom have stifled political dissent. The siblings' grievances largely center on the fate of the family's home after their father's death. The Lee patriarch, who died two years ago, warned against building a personality cult around his legacy and feared his old bungalow would be turned into a museum if it was not demolished. The pair said their brother Lee had defied their father's instructions to tear down the house.

'Absurd claim'

"We have observed that Hsien Loong and (his wife) Ho Ching want to milk Lee Kuan Yew's legacy for their own political purposes," the statement said, adding that they harbor political ambitions for one of their sons. Ho, a former civil servant, is the chief executive of state investment agency Temasek Holdings. The prime minister, who is on vacation overseas, fired back with his own statement, saying he was "deeply saddened by the unfortunate allegations."

"Ho Ching and I deny these allegations, espe-

cially the absurd claim that I have political ambitions for my son," Lee said. "Since my father's passing in March 2015, as the eldest son I have tried my best to resolve the issues among us... out of respect for our parents," he added. "My siblings' statement has hurt our father's legacy."

The premier's siblings also alleged they were being closely monitored, adding they had lost faith in their brother's ability to lead. "We feel hugely uncomfortable and closely monitored in our own country," they said. "We do not trust Hsien Loong as a brother or as a leader. We have lost confidence in him." Hsien Yang, a former brigadier-general like his brother, added that he "will leave Singapore for the foreseeable future" over the widening rift. He is currently chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore after holding top jobs in Singapore Telecom and beverage giant Fraser & Neave. Wei Ling, a medical doctor, is senior adviser to the National Neuroscience Institute.

Rare public criticism

The public dispute involving the country's first family has gone viral online in a country where open criticism of the ruling party is rare. Lee Kuan Yew, despite his major achievements in bringing economic prosperity, was criticized by rights groups for restricting political freedoms, including muzzling the press, jailing political opponents and suing critics for defamation. Premier Lee and former prime minister Goh Chok Tong have also sued critics for defamation.

The junior Lee led the PAP to a landslide victory in the 2015 general election, six months after the death of his father sparked a massive outpouring of support for the former leader's legacy. Analysts said that despite the quarrel, Lee's political position was unlikely to be affected. "Lee Hsien Loong I don't think will be challenged politically, his position is quite secure," Michael Barr, associate professor of international relations at Flinders University in Adelaide, told AFP. But he said the question remains whether this incident would affect "Brand Lee". Political analyst and former nominated lawmaker Eugene Tan said the dispute puts Lee in the "challenging position of having to defend himself while at the same time ensuring that confidence in Singapore's government remains unshaken." — AFP



SINGAPORE: This photograph taken on June 2, 2017 shows Singapore prime minister Lee Hsien Loong at an event at the Istana presidential palace. — AFP

RODMAN BEGINS N KOREA SIGHTSEEING

PYONGYANG: Dennis Rodman, the former NBA bad boy who has palled around with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, began sightseeing in Pyongyang yesterday during a trip he said he hoped would "open a door" for his former "Celebrity Apprentice" boss - US President Donald Trump. Hours after his arrival the previous day, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson announced that North Korea had released an American student serving a 15-year prison term with hard labor for alleged anti-state acts. A plane carrying Otto Warmbier arrived late Tuesday at an airport in Cincinnati. His parents say he has been in a coma and was medically evacuated.

Tillerson said the State Department secured his release at Trump's direction, and a spokeswoman was firm in saying Rodman's trip had nothing to do with Warmbier's release. Rodman, one of the few people to know both of the nuclear-armed leaders, sported dark sunglasses and athletic wear as he left his hotel in a black limo Wednesday morning without comment. He is scheduled to meet North Korea's sports minister before he leaves the country on Saturday.

He was met by North Korean Vice Minister of Sports Son Kwang Ho at the airport, saying then, "I'm just here to see some friends and have a good time." It was a relatively low-key arrival after his four past trips since 2013 generated a lot of publicity - most of it unfavorable - and did little in terms of diplomacy. His current visit has already been roundly criticized by some for its timing, during high tensions between the US and North Korea over its weapons programs and recent missile launches.

"Well, I'm pretty sure he's pretty much happy with the fact that I'm over here trying to accomplish something that we both need," Rodman said in Beijing when asked if Trump was aware of the trip. Rodman said the issue of several Americans detained by North Korea is "not my purpose right now," in remarks made in Beijing before the release of Warmbier was publicly disclosed.

The University of Virginia student from subur-

ban Cincinnati who publicly confessed to trying to steal a propaganda banner left North Korea on Tuesday morning, a foreign ministry official confirmed. Warmbier's parents said in a statement to AP that they had learned only a week ago that their son has been in a coma since March 2016. In Seoul, South Korea, US Undersecretary of State Thomas Shannon said "we pray for him and we pray for his family". Tillerson said the State Department is continuing to discuss three other detained Americans with North Korea.

In 2014, Rodman arranged a basketball game with other former NBA players and North Koreans and regaled leader Kim with a rendition of "Happy Birthday". On the same trip, he suggested an American missionary was at fault for his own imprisonment in North Korea, remarks for which he later apologized. Any visit to North Korea by a high-profile American is a political minefield.

Rodman has been criticized for failing to use his influence on leaders who are otherwise isolated diplomatically from the rest of the world. He has generally brushed off such criticism as unfair because as an athlete and celebrity he shouldn't be expected to solve difficult political problems.

Americans are regarded as enemies in North Korea because the two countries never signed a peace treaty to formally end the 1950-53 Korean War. Thousands of US troops are based in South Korea, and the Demilitarized Zone between the North and South is one of the most heavily fortified borders in the world. A statement issued in New York by a Rodman publicist said the former NBA player is in the rare position of being friends with the leaders of both North Korea and the United States. Rodman was a cast member on two seasons of Trump's TV reality show "Celebrity Apprentice." — AP



PYONGYANG: Former NBA basketball star Dennis Rodman visits the Sci-Tech Complex yesterday. — AP



CINCINNATI: Otto Warmbier, a 22-year-old college student detained and imprisoned in North Korea, is carried off of an airplane at Lunken Airport on Tuesday. — AP

AMERICAN STUDENT RELEASED FROM N KOREA ARRIVES IN US

WASHINGTON: An American student who fell into a coma while imprisoned in a North Korean labor camp returned to the United States late Tuesday after Pyongyang allowed him to be flown home, US media reported. A military airplane carrying Otto Warmbier landed in his hometown of Cincinnati shortly before 10:20 pm (0220 GMT yesterday), CBS News reported. The release of Warmbier, 18 months into a 15-year sentence, came as US President Donald Trump invited South Korea's new leader Moon Jae-In to Washington for talks on the escalating standoff over the North's nuclear program.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said earlier in the day that his agency had "secured" the 22-year-old's release in talks with North Korea and is pushing for three more Americans to be freed. It was not immediately clear if he had made any concessions. The news surfaced after the flamboyant retired NBA basketball star Dennis Rodman - a former contestant on Trump's "Celebrity Apprentice" reality show - flew to Pyongyang to resume his quixotic quest to broker detente between his US homeland and Kim Jong-Un's authoritarian regime. But State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said the visit "had nothing to do with the release."

Warmbier's parents Fred and Cindy announced his release in a statement to CNN on Tuesday. "Sadly, he is in a coma and

we have been told he has been in that condition since March of 2016," they said. "We learned of this only one week ago." "We want the world to know how we and our son have been brutalized and terrorized by the pariah regime" in North Korea, they added. On arriving in Cincinnati's Lunken Airport, Warmbier was transferred to a waiting ambulance that rushed him to the University of Cincinnati Medical Center for urgent treatment, Fox News reported.

Political pawn

Warmbier's parents were told their son had contracted botulism and was given a sleeping pill soon after his trial in March last year and never woke. The New York Times reported a senior US official as saying the authorities recently received intelligence indicating Warmbier was repeatedly beaten while in custody. US officials refused to comment on his condition, but former ambassador and New Mexico governor Bill Richardson said he had spoken with the family. "Otto has been in a coma for over a year now and urgently needs proper medical care in the United States," said Richardson, who has previously served as a special envoy to North Korea and still works on prisoner issues. "We received a call from Cindy and Fred Warmbier early today to update us on Otto's condition. In no uncertain terms, North Korea must explain the causes of his coma." — AFP



MARAWI: Soldiers aboard a vehicle maneuver through a street of this city on the southern island of Mindanao yesterday. — AFP

PHILIPPINES SAYS US TROOPS NEAR MARAWI, NOT FIGHTING

MARAWI CITY, Philippines: US troops are on the ground near Marawi City in the southern Philippines, but are not involved in fighting Islamist militants who have held parts of the city for more than three weeks, a Philippines military spokesman said yesterday. The Philippines military has previously said the United States was providing technical assistance to end the occupation of parts of Marawi City by fighters allied to the Islamic State group, but it had no boots on the ground.

"There are some US personnel who are operating equipment to provide information on situation awareness to our troops," Brigadier General Restituto Padilla told a news conference. "I do not know the exact number and the specific mission. They are allowed to carry rifles for self-defense. But they are not allowed to fight, they only provide support," he said. It was not clear how close to the battle zone the US troops were. They were from a contingent of Special Forces based in the southern city of

Zamboanga, the Philippines military has said previously. The US embassy in Manila did not respond to a request for comment. A US official in Washington, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the United States was providing a P-3 surveillance plane as well as intelligence gathering from a drone. That drone, however, crashed on Saturday after it lost communication links with its operator, the official said.

On Wednesday, government forces attacked rebel positions in Marawi with bombs, tank fire and helicopter gunships, and plumes of smoke could be seen rising from the battered city. Some sniper shots could be heard. Fighting died down in the afternoon when heavy rain fell. It was the 23rd day of fighting in Marawi, and there was no sign that it would end any time soon. "There will be no more deadlines," said Padilla, referring to a promise by the military to clear the city by June 12, the country's independence day. "It may take some time." — Reuters