

INDIA'S ARMY CHIEF: CHINA 'TESTING LIMITS'

NEW DELHI: India's army chief has said his country must be prepared for war and accused China of "testing our limits", days after the nuclear-armed neighbors ended one of their worst border stand-offs in decades. General Bipin Rawat said India could not afford to be complacent and should be prepared for the possibility of an all-out war.

"As far as our northern adversary is con-

cerned, flexing of muscles has started," Rawat said late Wednesday at a Delhi-based think-tank, in reference to China. "The salami slicing, taking over territory in a very gradual manner... testing our limits of threshold is something we have to be wary about and remain prepared for situations which could gradually emerge into conflict." "Whether these conflicts will be confined or limited in

space and time or whether these can expand into an all-out war along the entire front (remains to be seen)," the Army chief said. India and China went to war in 1962 over the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Last month, the two nations withdrew their troops to resolve a tense deadlock over part of a Himalayan plateau claimed by both China and Bhutan, an ally of India. Rawat

also said India's arch rival Pakistan—an ally of China—was likely to take advantage of the tensions. "The western adversary taking advantage of the situation developing along the northern border is very much likely," he said. Pakistan and India have fought three wars since independence, two of them over the disputed region of Kashmir, which both claim in full. — AFP

STUDENT BACKLASH DURING HK INDEPENDENCE ROW

HONG KONG: Hong Kong students have accused their universities of suppressing freedom of speech after banners and signs calling for the city's independence from China were taken down from campuses. The move has fuelled fears that freedoms are being squeezed in the semi-autonomous city and that Beijing is tightening its grip in a range of areas, from politics to media and education.

Since the failure of mass Umbrella Movement rallies to win democratic reform in 2014, some young campaigners say they want to see Hong Kong split completely from the mainland, a concept that infuriates Beijing. The latest row began on Monday when a large black banner reading "HK Independence" appeared at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. It is not clear who put it up. The student union there said it was taken down the same day.

A letter from the university's office of student affairs Tuesday, which was posted on the student union's Facebook page, warned pro-independence views violated Hong Kong law and said any more "improper" items would be removed. "The related opinions have violated relevant Hong Kong legislation, and violate the school's consistent and absolute opposition of Hong Kong independence," the letter said.

The student union questioned how putting a political opinion went against Hong Kong's mini-constitution, the Basic Law, which guarantees freedom of speech. In a statement it said it felt "deep regret" at the move. "The union will do its utmost to safeguard students' autonomy and freedom of speech," the statement added. Another large black banner and over 200 small posters calling for independence were still up at the university's campus.

'Democracy walls'

Multiple university unions said pro-independence signs had been taken down from their "Democracy Walls"—areas managed by students and used to express political opinions. A statement from the student union at the Education University of Hong Kong strongly condemned the school for "intervening in students' autonomy and suppressing freedom of speech". The Open University student union said the removal of signs showed institutions had "overstepped their authority" in a statement. But mainland Chinese students at CUHK said they agreed with the move.

"These comments make me feel uncomfortable and isolated from Hong Kong," one 22-year-old who gave his name as Horan told AFP. Another mainland Chinese student who did not want to be identified put up anti-independence signs at the university yesterday. "Hong Kong cannot be taken away from China, it's a part of China," he said.

A video posted on Facebook by citizen journalist platform Socrec Tuesday showed a woman speaking English and Mandarin Chinese—the dominant language in mainland China—angrily ripping down posters at CUHK depicting Hong Kong's skyline on fire with the words: "Fight for our homeland, fight for Hong Kong independence". The city was handed back to China by Britain in 1997 under a "one country, two systems" deal that allows it rights unseen on the mainland, but there are growing fears those liberties are disappearing. — AFP



HELMAND: In this photograph taken on August 27, 2017 Afghan Commandos transport a colleague feigning an injury on a stretcher as they participate in a combat training exercise at the Shorab Military Camp in Lashkar Gah. — AFP

TRUMP WINS SUPPORT FOR AFGHAN STRATEGY IN VOLATILE HELMAND

TALEBAN CONTINUES TO INFLICT STINGING BLOWS

CAMP SHORAB: Marines in Afghanistan's Helmand say Donald Trump's decision to keep boots on the ground indefinitely gives them "all the time in the world" to retake the province, once the symbol of US intervention but now a Taliban stronghold. They may need it. At the hot, dusty Camp Shorab, where many of the recently deployed Marines train their Afghan counterparts in flat, desert terrain, the Afghans admit their army still cannot fight alone.

The Taliban control or contest 12 out of Helmand's 14 districts and continue to inflict stinging blows on Afghan forces, who have been struggling to beat back the insurgents across the country since taking the lead on security from NATO forces at the end of 2014. Sixteen years since the American-led invasion, and after decades of near-constant war in the country, the Islamist extremists show few signs of flagging, despite being heavily outgunned by the might of the US military.

With no need to pay attention to four-year election cycles, the Taliban's fight against their technologically-superior foes is often summed up in the proverb: "You may have the watches, but we have the time". But Trump's announcement that the US commitment to Afghanistan is open-ended might just be enough to reverse the tide. "We have all the time in the world... to accomplish the mission the

right way," said Staff Sergeant George Caldwell, one of the Marines based at Camp Shorab.

Around 300 Marines returned to Helmand in April, a fraction of the more than 20,000 stationed in the poppy-growing province when it was the centerpiece of the US invasion. Previously, they were on the frontline against the Taliban. Now they are part of NATO's "train, advise and assist" mission, focused on making Afghan security forces strong enough to beat back the insurgents on their own.

Progress

Afghan troops are drilled in clearing insurgents from mud-brick compounds, evacuating wounded soldiers by helicopter and locating improvised explosive devices hidden in the ground. It is part of the "operational readiness cycle" launched by the Marines that takes war-weary Afghan soldiers off the battlefield for 12 weeks of training and rest. US trainers say the Afghans are making progress, retaking Nawa district in July after nine months in Taliban hands. But the insurgents are still on the offensive, carrying out a number of suicide attacks in Helmand in recent weeks.

In the province—as in the rest of the country—shockingly high casualties, along with desertions, corruption and exhaustion have eroded the morale of Afghan

forces. Major General Wali Mohammad Ahmadzai, who was appointed to lead the Afghan army's 215th Corps in Helmand last year, said the continued US support outlined by Trump was crucial. "Our army is not mature enough to fight alone," said Ahmadzai.

'Breathing space'

In his speech last month Trump refused to offer specifics, but officials have said the additional US troops could number some 4,000, on top of the 11,000-strong force already on the ground. US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said last week he had "signed orders" for the fresh deployment of troops "to enable the Afghan force to fight more effectively". But critics have questioned what a few thousand fresh US troops can do that previous forces—who numbered some 100,000 at the height of the fighting—have not.

Despite the lack of details—including any indication of how many more troops would be sent to Helmand, and when—the Marines at Camp Shorab said the fresh forces would make a difference. "What additional troops (would) give us is the capability to move faster—if you add more resources and advisers we would be able to achieve effects faster," said Brigadier General Roger Turner, commander of the Helmand mission. — AFP