

International

Modi, Macron sign security deal with an eye on China

'A strong part of our security and the world's stability is at stake'

NEW DELHI: French President Emmanuel Macron yesterday said defense ties with India had reached a new high after the two nations signed a key security accord for the Indian Ocean to counter China's growing influence in the region. "Defense cooperation between the two countries now has a new significance," Macron said as a gushing Prime Minister Narendra Modi stood by his side.

Under the deal, India and France will open their naval bases to warships from each other, a move seen as an attempt to undermine China's territorial ambitions. "A strong part of our security and the world's stability is at stake in the Indian Ocean," Macron said. "The Indian Ocean, like the Pacific Ocean, cannot become a place of hegemony," he added in an apparent reference to China. Modi, who welcomed Macron with a bear hug on his arrival Friday, said the accord was crucial as the Indian Ocean region would play a "very significant role" in the days to come.

The comments from the leaders followed a slew of agreements signed by the two countries in the spheres of defense, space and clean energy. "From the ground to the sky, there is no subject on which India and France are not working together," said Modi. A technical agreement was also signed on the French-assisted nuclear power project at Jaitapur in western Maharashtra state. Sources in the French presidency told AFP they were optimistic of a final agreement being signed before the end of the year.

The \$9.3-billion framework agreement for six nuclear reactors was signed during a visit to India in 2010 by then president Nicolas Sarkozy. But the proj-

ect has since run into stiff opposition from environmentalists concerned about seismic activity in the area and fears about the safety of nuclear power in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan.

'Good chemistry'

Earlier in the day, Macron talked about his personal rapport with Modi which was established after their meeting in Paris last year. "I think we have very good chemistry, our two great democracies have a historic relationship," the French president said. Modi broke protocol to receive Macron at the airport, exchanging warm hugs and robust handshakes. "You welcomed me in Paris last year with an open heart and a lot of warmth. I am happy that I have got an opportunity to welcome you in India," Modi said at the start of his speech yesterday.

Today, Macron will attend a solar power summit designed to showcase India and France's commitment to fighting climate change, which both leaders have made a priority. Travelling with his wife Brigitte, France's 40-year-old president will also visit the monument to love, the Taj Mahal, a few hours drive from the Indian capital on Sunday. On Monday, he heads to the chaotic Hindu holy city of Varanasi on the banks of the river Ganges, which the Indian premier has promised to modernize and clean up.

Macron's visit comes after a somewhat misstep-laden visit to India by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Both he and Macron are often compared internationally because of their broadly similar political views, as well as youth and good looks.

But Trudeau's visit hit a series of embarrassing



NEW DELHI: This handout photograph released by the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs yesterday shows Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (R) and France's President Emmanuel Macron walking together before a meeting at Hyderabad House. —AFP

bumps and he received a fairly cool reception during his stay in India. Trudeau was pilloried on social media and in the Canadian press for donning traditional Indian clothing at every opportunity. And there were

red faces when it emerged a former Sikh militant was invited to a dinner with him in Mumbai. Macron has so far opted for more sober and predictable dress—a dark suit. —AFP



\$9.3-billion framework agreement

Down but not out: Lord's Resistance Army haunts C Africa

OBO, Central African Republic: Every morning, Joseph gets on his motorbike to tend to his field of manioc, in the thick bush surrounding the Obo, in southeastern Central African Republic. This day, though, is not ordinary. Joseph is tense with worry. There are rumors that the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), one of Africa's most notorious and longest-surviving militias, is in the area.

"They recently attacked hunters just 15 kilometers away," said Joseph, who, despite his fears, picks up his tools to work on his precious crop. The LRA dates back to January 1987, when a voodoo priestess, Alice Auma Lakwena, set up a rebel group to fight Uganda's new leader, Yoweri Museveni. The following year, Joseph Kony, presented as Lakwena's cousin, took over the group, which was renamed the LRA and whose mission was to rule by the Bible's Ten Commandments.

The fanatical Christian movement became a byword across central Africa for mutilations, massacres, kidnappings and the forced enrolment of children. According to a UN toll in 2013, the LRA was to blame for the deaths of more than 100,000 people, the abduction of between 60,000 and 100,000 children and the displacement of 2.5 million people.

Threat to local people

The militia began to be rolled back in 2011 by a force of 2,000 Ugandan troops, supported by about a hundred US military advisors based in CAR. Last March, the US military wrapped up its side of the operation, saying the LRA had been "reduced to irrelevance", and a month later the Ugandan army began withdrawing its troops from CAR.

Today, according to Laurent Wastelain, a representative of the UN peacekeeping mission in CAR, the LRA has been reduced to about 200 people, women and children included, spread across three groups, one of which is dissident. "The organisation's political doctrine is falling away," he said in Obo. "They've gone from economic profit-making to economic subsistence, based on looting and trafficking." The Ugandan and American pullout from southeast CAR, the absence of the state in this strife-torn region and the lack of a UN mandate to fight the LRA means that these marauding remnants are a lethal menace to local people. Since April 19, 2017, when Uganda began its phased withdrawal, the LRA has struck 34 times in CAR, killing nine people and kidnapping 129 others, according to LRA Crisis Tracker, a site run by an NGO that is trying, in difficult conditions, to monitor the problem.

Fleeing abduction

Kidnappings are an LRA specialty, witnesses in Obo said. The militants capture adults to carry their loot and turn their children into fighters. "On February 9, I was with nine hunters in a place about 100 kilometers west of Obo," said Brice, who has fled to the town from his home in Mboki. "The LRA held us up, they took the manioc flour, the smoked fish, the meat and the ammunition," he said adding that this was the third time he had been robbed by the group.

Francois Apoyo, another man displaced from Mboki, said the LRA seized him on November 24 — "they held us for a week, we carried their belongings." The two men described small, mobile groups of LRA fighters speaking Acholi, the language of an ethnic Ugandan minority, dressed in combat gear, boots, carrying assault rifles and equipped with solar panels and satellite phones. They were accompanied by women and children who had been abducted. Beatrice, not her real name, described how she was kidnapped in November last year—an ordeal that ended after she ran away three weeks later. —AFP

Philippines slams UN rights chief for 'disrespectful' remarks

MANILA: The Philippine foreign minister hit back yesterday at the United Nations' human rights chief for issuing "irresponsible and disrespectful" comments about President Rodrigo Duterte, warning such remarks could set a dangerous precedent. Duterte's attacks against UN human rights activists suggest he needs to see a psychiatrist, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein told a news conference on Friday.

Zeid's comments came after the Philippine justice ministry filed a petition in a Manila court seeking the declaration of more than 600 alleged communist guerrillas, including a UN special reporter, as "terrorists", a development first reported by Reuters. The petition included Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, appointed in 2014 as UN special reporter on the rights of indigenous peoples, who was listed as a senior member of the country's Maoist rebel group. Tauli-Corpuz called the complaint "baseless, malicious and irresponsible".

Zeid said Duterte's attacks against UN special reporters cannot go unanswered and the UN Human Rights Council must take a position. He said the Philippine leader "needs to submit himself to some sort of psychiatric examination". Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano said: "The Philippines takes grave exception to the irresponsible and disrespectful comments of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights that cast untoward aspersions regarding the President of the Republic of the Philippines."

Duterte has also repeatedly insulted the current UN special reporter on extrajudicial killings, Agnes Callamard, because of her criticism of his bloody anti-narcotics cam-



DAVAO CITY: This photo taken and released by Presidential Photographers Division (PPD) on March 1, 2018 shows President Rodrigo Duterte firing a few rounds with a sniper rifle during the opening ceremony of the National Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) Challenge. —AFP

paign. The Philippines welcomed a UN investigation into Duterte's signature war on drugs but objected to Callamard leading it, saying she was biased and not qualified. Cayetano said in a strongly worded statement the Philippines was bothered by "the manner in which a ranking UN human rights official can overstep his mandate and insult leaders of member-states without first giving them due process".

"This could set a dangerous precedent that the council

would have to immediately address as otherwise member-states could also fall victim to those who seek to politicize and weaponize human rights to undermine legitimate governments," he said. Duterte's spokesman, Harry Roque, said Zeid's language was an affront to Philippine sovereignty. "I would hope that although you do not have the same democratic system in your home country of Jordan, you will respect the kind of democracy that we have in the Philippines," he said in a message to Zeid. —Reuters

Hundreds join pro-democracy, anti-junta rally

BANGKOK: Hundreds of pro-democracy Thais rallied in Bangkok yesterday to skewer the ruling junta with T-shirts, signs and speeches, as activists grow bolder in their defiance of a ban on protests. The military regime has kept a tight rein on dissent since its 2014 power grab by outlawing gatherings of more than five people and pursuing activists in the courts. But impatience with the generals has been mounting ever since their latest delay of elections, which are now tentatively set for February 2019.

In one of the largest showings in a recent string of protests, around 500 people turned up for a festive picnic-style rally held on a university field in Bangkok yesterday. "Who out there has a fire for democracy?" one young activist called out to the crowd from the top of a truck, eliciting loud cheers. While organizers raged against the military dictatorship over loudspeakers, vendors handed out free meals and sold shirts with sly references to a spate of graft scandals that have helped fuel the dissent.

One shirt bore the face of a black leopard, an animal that has become a symbol of inequality and corruption ever since a construction tycoon was



BANGKOK: A Thai anti-junta activist holds a banner saying stop prolonging power, stop delaying elections while stepping on a cartoon of a military tank during a pro-democracy rally at a university field. —AFP

caught hunting the wild cat in a wildlife sanctuary in February. In reference to another high-profile scandal, veteran activist Ekachai Hongkangwan showed up in a vest covered with paper watches—a jab at the junta no. 2, who is facing a graft probe after online sleuths spotted him wearing dozens of undeclared luxury timepieces.

The two dramas strike at the heart of public anguish over an entrenched culture of impunity for the kingdom's wealthy and well-connected. In a nod to junta chief Prayut Chan-O-Cha's repeated poll postponements, another demonstrator donned a mask resem-

bling the general's face and the character Pinocchio—whose nose grows longer with each lie.

"This year more people are daring to (come out), especially after the junta government has failed to keep (its) promises on elections," Ekachai, who helped lead the event, told AFP. Even if a vote is held next year, it will not restore the same level of democracy Thailand enjoyed before the coup. A new military-drafted charter has turned the upper house into an appointed body and also opens a channel for an unelected premier to take office—a set-up analysts say junta chief Prayut is eyeing. —AFP

Myanmar monk returns to preaching after ban

YANGON: Myanmar Buddhist monk Wirathu said yesterday his anti-Muslim rhetoric had nothing to do with violence in the western state of Rakhine, as he emerged from a one-year preaching ban. Wirathu is the most prominent of Myanmar's hard-line nationalist monks, who have emerged as a political force since the country's transition from full military rule began in 2011.

Violence has hit Muslim communities across the Buddhist-majority country, but the nationalists' sharpest vitriol is reserved for the Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine, who many see as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, or "Bengalis". Nearly 700,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh since insurgents attacked police and army posts on Aug. 25, sparking a furious military-led response the United Nations has said constituted ethnic cleansing and possibly genocide.

Rakhine was experiencing "terrorism of Bengalis", Wirathu said yesterday, dismissing claims he had "created" conflict there. He cited the relative peace of his hometown, Mandalay. "If Wirathu creates conflict, Mandalay would become ash. The world doesn't know this truth," the monk said, referring to himself at a ceremony in Myanmar's largest city, Yangon, to celebrate his return to preaching.

The central Myanmar city of Mandalay was hit by communal riots that killed two people in 2014 after news spread of what turned out to be a false claim that Muslims had raped a Buddhist woman. Wirathu travelled at least twice in the past year to the violence-hit northern part of Rakhine, despite Myanmar's highest religious authority imposing a one-year preaching ban in March 2017.

The state-linked body's move was seen as an attempt by the government of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi to stifle nationalists who threaten to undermine the young administration. —Reuters