

International

China must gear for military action over Taiwan: Daily

Beijing 'angered' by passing of new US law on Taiwan ties

BEIJING: A widely read Chinese state-run newspaper said yesterday China should prepare for military action over self-ruled Taiwan, and pressure Washington over cooperation on North Korea, after the United States passed a law to boost ties with Taiwan.

Beijing was infuriated after US President Donald Trump signed legislation last week that encourages the United States to send senior officials to Taiwan to meet Taiwanese counterparts and vice versa. US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Alex Wong said in Taipei on Wednesday the United States' commitment to Taiwan has never been stronger and the island is an inspiration to the rest of the Indo-Pacific region.

China claims Taiwan as its own and considers the self-ruled island a wayward province, which Chinese President Xi Jinping said on Tuesday would face the "punishment of history" for any attempt at separatism. The Global Times said in an editorial China had to "strike back" against the law, for example by pressuring the United States in other areas of bilateral cooperation like over North Korea and Iran.

"The mainland must also prepare itself for a direct military clash in the Taiwan Straits. It needs to make clear that escalation of US-Taiwan official exchanges will bring serious conse-

quences to Taiwan," said the paper, which is published by the ruling Communist Party's official People's Daily.

"This newspaper has suggested that the mainland can send military planes and warships across the Taiwan Straits middle line. This can be implemented gradually depending on the cross-Straits situation," it said. Underscoring China's concerns, Taiwan's government and the de facto US embassy on the island said a second senior US official would be visiting Taiwan this week. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Manufacturing Ian Steff.

In Beijing, foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying reiterated China's opposition to official contacts between the two, urging people to reread Xi's comments from earlier in the week.

"The Chinese people share a common belief that it is never allowed, and it is absolutely impossible, to separate any inch of our great country's territory from China," Hua said, quoting Xi. The island is one of China's most sensitive issues and a potential military flashpoint. Underlining that threat, Taiwan sent ships and an aircraft earlier on Wednesday to shadow a Chinese aircraft carrier group through the narrow Taiwan Strait, its defense ministry said. China's hostility towards Taiwan has risen since the

Hong Kong shops defy ban on trade in pangolin scales

HONG KONG: On a winding Hong Kong street where shops keep a dizzying array of dried produce, one highly valued ingredient is still being sold despite being subject to an international ban: deep-fried scales of endangered pangolins.

The reclusive pangolin, also known as the scaly anteater, has become the most trafficked mammal on earth due to soaring demand in China and Vietnam. While its scales are prized for their supposed medicinal properties in treating everything from acne to liver disease and cancer, its flesh is considered a delicacy. Trade in the animals was banned in 2016 to protect remaining populations, but AFP found traditional Chinese medicine shops in Hong Kong still selling bags of pangolin scales, stashed away out of sight. "If you need it for health reasons, I will look to see if I have some," one elderly shopkeeper said, before stepping on a ladder to reach a package hidden behind stacks of boxes.

He brought down a sack of deep-fried scales and named his price: 500 Hong Kong dollars (\$65) for a mere 40 grams. Then he flipped through a ledger of traditional Chinese medicine recipes, showing a type of tea that calls for

ground pangolin scales mixed with herbs and roots. Hong Kong has an unenviable reputation for trading in several controversial, banned or endangered commodities including ivory, shark fin, rhino horn and tiger parts and critics routinely accuse the territory of failing to do enough to stamp out such practices.

The shopkeeper even refuted the need for conservation: "There are still many pangolins in Asia. They're only saying that they are endangered." An estimated one million of the animals have been plucked from Asian and African forests over the past decade, shunting them onto the list of species at the highest risk of extinction. Another shop on the same street had an even bigger stash of deep-fried scales, also concealed behind stacks of boxes and on sale for \$82 per 40 grams.

"Pangolin can rid the body of toxins. This is really good quality and worth the price," the saleswoman said. Campaigners say there is no evidence to support any of the medicinal claims attributed to pangolin. A third shopkeeper did not have scales on display but said they were available on "special order".

High-speed boat chase

About the size of a small dog, pangolins are almost defenceless in the wild, curling up into a ball when they are scared, allowing poachers to easily scoop them up. Commercial breeding is unfeasible because pangolins are picky eaters, prone to disease and easily stressed. Their average survival rate in captivity is less than five years compared to 20 years in the wild.

Hong Kong is a top destination for illegal pangolin shipments because there is demand from local residents, and the semi-autonomous



BEIJING: Chinese President Xi Jinping (left) meets with President of Cameroon Paul Biya (not pictured) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday.—AFP

2016 election of President Tsai Ing-wen, a member of the island's pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party. China suspects Tsai wants to push for formal independence,

which would cross a red line for Communist Party leaders in Beijing, though Tsai has said she wants to maintain the status quo and is committed to ensuring peace. — Reuters

city also functions as a first stop for onward smuggling to southern mainland China.

In September 2016, all 182 member nations of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) agreed to move pangolins into the highest protection category banning all trade. Previously, CITES allowed for trade in pangolins but under strict conditions.

"If Hong Kong was following CITES guidelines and implementing the policy decisions made in 2016, then this would no longer be happening in 2018," said Astrid Andersson, founder of Hong Kong for Pangolins. Updated sentencing guidelines taking effect in May will increase the maximum jail term for trafficking and possession of endangered species from two to 10 years but the law is rarely enforced and the city has come under fire for some relatively lax penalties for CITES violations in the past. "A slap-on-the-wrist fine from Hong Kong authorities is not uncommon for smugglers, who generally avoid trafficking their illegal wildlife products straight into mainland China because of much heavier sentences there," said Alex Hofford, wildlife campaigner for WildAid. Hong Kong's Customs and Excise Department told AFP they are committed to combating smuggling activities and conducts checks on "passengers, cargoes, postal packets and conveyances at various control points and sea boundaries".

The amount of pangolin scales recovered in Hong Kong increased in 2017 after the CITES protection upgrade—a total of 7.7 tons from 21 seizures compared to 1.4 tons in 2016 from 24 seizures. The countries of origin in the shipments were all African, according to government data. In December, customs officers pursued a gang of smugglers for two hours on speedboats



HONG KONG: This undated handout photo provided by Kadoorie Farm and Botanic Garden on Wednesday shows a Chinese pangolin during a health check in Hong Kong. — AFP

in Hong Kong waters after two vessels were detected trying to enter mainland China.

The gang members jumped into the sea and swam ashore to escape, but officers recovered pangolin scales and arrested one Hong Kong resident in connection with the case.—AFP