

International

Confrontations after rally to support Hong Kong's police

Hong Kong's worst political unrest in a generation

HONG KONG: Angry confrontations broke out around Hong Kong's parliament yesterday as protesters supporting the city's police taunted anti-government demonstrators on the eve of the anniversary of the semi-autonomous territory's 1997 handover from Britain to China. Crowds of police supporters chanted "Chinese traitors!" and profanities at their largely young opponents - highlighting the ideological fissures running through the finance hub as it experiences its worst political unrest in a generation.

Hong Kong saw two record-breaking rallies earlier this month by anti-government protesters opposed to a now-postponed plan to approve extradition to mainland China. But it has also been rocked by unprecedented clashes. On 12 June police used tear gas and rubber bullets to clear largely young anti-extradition protesters from around parliament.

The police classified the demonstration as a riot and defended their tactics, but opponents have accused officers of using excessive force and called for an independent inquiry. Twice in the last two weeks the city's police headquarters has been blockaded by angry crowds. Yesterday it was the turn of pro-government supporters, who rallied in their tens of thousands, many waving Chinese flags. "I can't put up with peoples' behaviour towards police," 70-year-old demonstrator Frances Yu told AFP.

Small camp

A 54-year-old office worker, who gave his surname as Wong, said officers were trying to "maintain order" and that anti-extradition demonstrators had gone too far. "It's like they went crazy, those who charged, lam-

basted police... I find it so senseless," he said. The rally, which heard speeches from pro-Beijing lawmakers and former police brass, passed off without incident. But as the pro-government supporters headed for home, many turned on small groups of anti-government opponents who have kept a small camp outside the parliament for the last three weeks.

Police had to repeatedly intervene to help largely young anti-government protesters escape after they were surrounded by larger crowds of pro-establishment supporters, many jabbing fingers in their opponents' chests, scuffling with them and hurling insults. "Traitors!" and "Rioters!" were the two most common chants from police supporters as well as a plethora of Cantonese swear words.

Much of the protest artwork and posters pinned to the city's parliament walls were also torn down by police supporters as they passed by. The pro-democracy camp will hold another rally on Monday, with organisers expecting a huge turnout. The extradition protests were the latest manifestation of growing fears, especially among young Hong Kongers, that China is trampling on the city's unique freedoms and culture - aided by the pro-Beijing government.

Years of protests calling for Hong Kongers to be able to elect their leaders have won no concessions from Beijing. But there is also a staunchly nationalist, pro-establishment strain that runs through the city, especially among older generations, who regard pro-democracy protesters with disdain and welcome Beijing's increased control.

Organisers of the pro-police rally told local media some 165,000 people attended while police gave a



HONG KONG: Demonstrators rally in support of police outside the Legislative Council in Hong Kong yesterday. The international finance hub witnessed the worst political violence in a generation as police fought largely young demonstrators opposed to a now postponed plan to allow extraditions to the Chinese mainland. —AFP

lower figure of 53,000 at its peak. Yesterday, Zhou Fengsuo, a survivor of Beijing's deadly Tiananmen crackdown, said he was denied entry into Hong Kong

on arrival at the airport, posting a picture online of the refusal form he was given by immigration once he landed in Taiwan. —AFP

Libyan fighters seize US, Chinese missiles from Haftar forces

TRIPOLI: Forces allied to Libya's internationally recognised government based in Tripoli captured sophisticated US and Chinese rockets as well as drones when they seized a town from eastern forces last week, officials said on Saturday. On Wednesday, Tripoli's forces took Gharyan, south of the capital, which eastern forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar had used as their main supply base to attack Tripoli, home to the recognised administration. Officials showed journalists weapons they said had been seized, among them sophisticated US-made Javelin anti-tank missiles.

They also presented advanced Chinese-made laser-guided artillery shells, and said combat drones had been

also been captured, in addition to some 150 prisoners. Inscriptions on the Javelin missiles said they had originally belonged to the armed forces of the United Arab Emirates, one of Haftar's main backers. UN reports have previously said that the UAE and Egypt have been arming Haftar's Libya National Army (LNA) since 2014, but details have been unclear.

Oded Berkowitz, Israeli security analyst and deputy chief intelligence officer of the MAX consultancy, said it was the first time that Javelins had been sighted in the Libya conflict. "The weapons themselves are highly advanced but wouldn't be a game changer in Libya," he said. "The real political game changer is the fact that advanced US systems were delivered to a third party, and this may push the US to oppose the UAE and their support for the LNA."

Haftar began his assault on Tripoli on April 4, surprising the United Nations, which had been preparing for a national conference to try to end the chaos gripping Libya since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The offensive by the



TRIPOLI: Fighters loyal to the internationally-recognised Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) display US-made Javelin anti-tank missile and precision guided munition, which were reportedly confiscated from forces loyal to General Khalifa Haftar in Gharyan. —AFP

LNA, which is allied to a parallel administration in the east, has not made it beyond the southern suburbs of Tripoli.

Turkey has supplied Tripoli's forces with drones and other military equipment, according to diplomats. —Reuters

Syrians dig, cook, fill sandbags in war with Assad

ATARIB: Away from the frontlines, volunteers are helping in the war against President Bashar Al-Assad by cooking, filling sandbags, collecting old tyres and digging trenches, aiming to help ward off his assault on northwestern Syria. It is part of the civilian effort to help defend the last major rebel stronghold from Assad and his Russian allies who have been pounding it for weeks.

Abu Abdo, 51, says he is playing his part by collecting old tyres to be burned by fighters to create a smoke screen from hostile warplanes. "We go to places where tyres are repaired, collect them and take them to the fighters," said Abu Abdo, 51, as he piled tyres into the back of a truck with the help of his sons in the town of Salqin. "These tyres have no value but protect (the fighters) and keep the enemy busy," said Abu Abdo, as two of sons sat atop the pile of tyres in the back of the truck.

In recent years, Assad's opponents have poured into northwestern Syria from other parts of Syria that have been taken from rebels. The region, which includes Idlib province and parts of neighbouring provinces, has an estimated 3 million inhabitants, about half of whom had

already fled fighting elsewhere according to the United Nations. With nowhere else for these people to flee, many have a stake in fending off the attack on the northwest. To this end, activists and religious leaders launched a campaign in May called "fire an arrow with them".

Volunteers at work in a kitchen in the town of Atarib are preparing 2,000 meals a day for fighters as part of the campaign. Yellow rice is spooned from large vats into polystyrene trays and lentil soup is poured into bags ready for delivery to fighters. "The car leaves from here to the frontlines under air strikes and surveillance sometimes," said a 40-year-old man at work in the kitchen who gave his name as Abu Wael. "God willing we continue so these meals reach the fighters."

Digging trenches

At a nearby quarry, sacks that once contained rice were being filled with grit for use as sandbag defences. "We are filling according to the demand of the front-line. The command centre, for example, requests 200 bags or 1,000 bags for one position," said Khaled Al-Jamal, 26, at work with a group of other volunteers.

He finished his high school education but was unable to register at university once the war began in 2011. He hopes his effort will help fighters so "all their effort is directed at repelling the regime". In Salqin, men use shovels, pick axes and pneumatic drills to dig a trench in an olive grove as part of another civilian cam-



KAFRANBEL: A man gazes at rubble and damaged vehicles following reported air strikes by the Syrian regime ally Russia, in the town of Kafranbel in the rebel-held part of the Syrian Idlib province. —AFP

paign, this one called "the Popular Resistance Battalions".

A long way from the frontline, Yehya al-Sheikh, 38, says the trench he is digging with others will provide protection from air strikes for a family living nearby. "We came to dig trenches to defend ourselves and our people and to support our Mujahideen brothers against Bashar al-Assad." Some 300,000 people in the northwest have been uprooted since late April and local sources have reported that hundreds of civilians including women

and children have been killed, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs says.

The territory is largely controlled by Tahrir Al-Sham, a jihadist group representing the latest incarnation of the Nusra Front, formerly Al-Qaeda's Syrian wing, though groups fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army also have a presence. The Syrian government, which has vowed to recover "every inch" of Syria, says it is responding to attacks by Al-Qaeda-linked jihadists. —Reuters

UN urges action to avert climate change 'catastrophe'

ABU DHABI: UN chief Antonio Guterres said climate-related devastation was striking the planet on a weekly basis and warned yesterday that urgent action must be taken to avoid a catastrophe. "We are here because the world is facing a grave climate emergency," Guterres told a two-day Abu Dhabi Climate Meeting to prepare for a Climate Action Summit in New York in September. Guterres said destructive climate change was moving at an increasingly fast pace.

"Climate disruption is happening now... It is progressing even faster than the world's top scientists have predicted," the UN secretary general said. "It is outpacing our efforts to address it. Climate change is running faster than we are," he said. "Every week brings new climate-related devastation... floods, drought, heatwaves, wildfires and super storms," Guterres said. He warned the situation would only deteriorate unless "we act now with ambition and urgency", but some of the world's decision-makers still did not realize the dangers.

The meeting in Abu Dhabi, with government and civil society participants from dozens of countries, will select from 100 proposals for protecting the climate, said UN special envoy Luis Alfonso de Alba. "I think what is important is to identify those proposals that have transformation impact," De Alba told AFP. The selected proposals will be submitted to the summit in New York, he said. The UN chief held out hope that the Paris Agreement could cut harmful emissions and reduce global warming.

"But we know that even if the promises of Paris are fully met, we still face at least a three-degree temperature rise by the end of the century - a catastrophe for life as we know it," Guterres said. He was convening the Climate Action Summit because many countries were not even keeping pace with their promises under the Paris Agreement.

Under the Paris Agreement, the world is required to keep temperature rise under 2 degrees Celsius by the end of the century. France's secretary of state for ecological and inclusive transition, Brune Poirson, taking part in the Abu Dhabi meeting, called for "mobilizing private financing" to fund climate programs and actions. "What we have to do is mobilize more private capital and instead of having private money invested in coal projects... it should be invested in renewable energy," she told AFP.

She called on developed countries to fulfill their pledge under the Paris Agreement to transfer \$100 billion to developing nations. A landmark report last year by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) said a safer cap of a 1.5 degree rise would see nations rapidly slash planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions via a sharp drawdown of fossil fuel use.

But some high-polluting nations, led by Saudi Arabia, have questioned the IPCC's findings, leading to angry exchanges at closed-door talks in Bonn. IPCC warned in October that warming was on track towards a catastrophic 3C or 4C rise, and that avoiding global chaos would require a major transformation. In his speech, the UN secretary general also called for governments to "stop subsidizing fossil fuels... (and) stop building new coal plants by 2020". —AFP

Stateless woman tells how she couldn't visit her dying dad

THE HAGUE: When Ekaterina's father was dying she could not visit him in Uzbekistan because she did not have a passport - so she tried to get herself deported. But as a stateless person living in the United States, she could not even do that. Ekaterina is among hundreds of thousands of ex-Soviet citizens who have not been able to acquire the nationality of any of the successor states since the break-up of the bloc.

Some like Ekaterina, who was abroad when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, have been stranded in limbo ever since. Ekaterina told her story in a film shown at a global conference on statelessness in The Hague that ends on Friday. Stateless people do not have passports so were unable to attend in person to tell their stories, although delegates included a number of formerly stateless people.

An empty chair was placed next to panelists speaking at the conference to symbolize the people who could not be there. Ekaterina is a member of United Stateless, a campaign group comprising stateless people from various backgrounds living in the United States. There are an estimated 10 to 15 million stateless people globally who are not recognized as a citizen of any country. There are no statistics on the number in

the United States.

People end up stateless for a host of complex historical, social and legal reasons - including migration, flawed citizenship laws and ethnic discrimination. Sometimes called "nowhere people" or "legal ghosts", they are often deprived of basic rights and vulnerable to exploitation. "Stateless people live in fear of detention - all the time," said another woman in the video called DA who was born stateless in Kuwait. Ekaterina said she had not been able to end her statelessness even though she was married to an American.

"Several years ago I learnt my father was dying. I made the heart-wrenching decision to deport myself to be by his side. I was denied deportation," she said, adding she had not seen her family for 24 years. Miliyon, born to an Eritrean father and Ethiopian moth-

er, said he had spent \$50,000 on legal fees but still had no solution in sight. "I'm a tax payer and I cannot open a bank account, I cannot get a driving licence, I cannot report a crime," he said. The United Nation launched an ambitious campaign in 2014 to eradicate statelessness within a decade.

Some countries, including Brazil, the Netherlands and Britain, have set up procedures which provide stateless people with a way to legalise their residence so they can rebuild their lives. Melanie Khanna, head of the UN refugee agency's section on statelessness, urged the United States to set up a stateless determination procedure to help those like Ekaterina. She said stateless people often lived isolated lives and hoped United Stateless would spur the creation of similar groups around the world. —Reuters