

## International

# Sri Lanka president vetoes military deal with the US

## American troops not to get free access to island's ports

**COLOMBO:** Sri Lanka's President yesterday announced he will not allow his government to conclude a proposed military deal that would allow US troops free access to the island's ports. Maithripala Sirisena said he was opposed to the draft Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that the two countries are negotiating to further strengthen their military ties.

Sirisena is at loggerheads with his pro-Western Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. "I will not allow any agreement that undermines our independence and sovereignty," Sirisena told a public rally in the island's south. "Several agreements currently being discussed are detrimental to our country."

"I will not allow the SOFA that seeks to betray the nation. Some foreign forces want to make Sri Lanka one of their bases. I will not allow them to come into the country and challenge our sovereignty."

The SOFA seeks to ensure reciprocal access to port facilities and allow freer entry to military personnel and their contractors. Sirisena said there will be no bilateral agreements "against Sri Lanka's national interest" as long as he was in office. His term ends in January.

He did not name the powers he accused of trying to gain a military foothold in his Indian Ocean island republic of 21 million people. However, it was a thinly

veiled reference to the US which is keen on strengthening their existing military cooperation.

A year ago, Washington announced it was granting \$39 million to boost maritime security in Sri Lanka as China developed its strategic hold on the Indian Ocean island. Increased US interest in Sri Lanka comes as China is upping investment in ports and other building projects on the island, which is a key link in Beijing's ambitious "Belt and Road" infrastructure initiative.

The US had stopped arms sales to Sri Lanka during the height of the island's Tamil separatist war that ended in 2009. The global power has also been highly critical of the human rights record of the former government of strongman president, Mahinda Rajapakse. Several senior military commanders from the Rajapakse regime have been denied visas to visit the US.

China has vowed to keep providing financial help, including loans, to Sri Lanka despite warnings about the island nation's mounting debt. Sri Lanka in 2017 granted a 99-year lease on a strategic port to Beijing because of it could not repay Chinese loans for the \$1.4 billion project. The port in Hambantota straddles the world's busiest east-west shipping route and also gives a strategic foothold to China in a region long dominated by India. — AFP



**COLOMBO:** Sri Lanka's President Maithripala Sirisena (center) waits next to Navy officers for a group photo during a ceremony commissioning P 626 ship, US gifted to the Sri Lankan coastguard at the main port in Colombo yesterday. The vessels are to be used to help merchant shipping and protect the islands coastline. — AFP

## Fear and defiance mark life for Pakistan's minority Hazaras

**HAZARA TOWN, Pakistan:** High walls around the neighborhoods of Pakistan's embattled Hazara community in the southwestern city of Quetta are designed to protect them from extremist militants, but also serve as a constant reminder of the threat they face.

Soldiers and security checkpoints greet visitors to Hazara Town, one of two large guarded neighborhoods in the capital of Baluchistan, a province where religious and sectarian groups often target the mostly Shia Hazaras with bombs and guns. Despite improved security in recent years, partly because most Hazaras have moved into the guarded enclaves, hardline Sunni militants keep up attacks, such as a blast in April that killed 24 people, among them eight Hazaras.

"We are living under siege for more than 1-1/2 decades due to sectarian attacks," said Sardar Sahil, a Hazara lawyer and rights activist. "Though all these checkpoints were established for our security, we feel we were ourselves also cut off from other communities."

Sahil carries a pistol whenever he leaves home, and relies on his faith as a second layer of security.

"I kiss my mother's hand and she kisses me too and says goodbye with her prayers and good wishes," Sahil told Reuters at his home. Hazaras, said to be descendants of the Mongols who swept out of central Asia to rule the subcontinent for many centuries, are easily distinguishable in Pakistan by their facial features.

That has made them vulnerable to attacks by groups such as Pakistan's banned Lashkar-



**HAZARA TOWN, Pakistan:** Pakistan's embattled Hazara community protest in the southwestern city of Quetta. — Reuters

e-Jhangvi (LeJ), and Sunni militant group Islamic State, which has attacked them in both Pakistan and neighboring Afghanistan, also home to many Hazaras. Many community businesses that flourished in Quetta's bustling wholesale markets have shuttered and relocated to Hazara Town or Mari Abad, another Hazara neighborhood.

But the community is defiant. Some still venture out into Quetta in search of work, while others keep businesses running. The Quetta community held its first Hazara Culture Day this week to celebrate and showcase its history, music and traditions.

The community strives to keep its protests peaceful, despite unrest stirred up by militants looking to pit people of different sects against each other, said Abdul Khaliq Hazara, chairman of the Hazara Democratic Party (HDP), which

has two provincial assembly representatives.

Domestic media often portray the Hazaras as targets of sectarian attacks or holding sit-ins to demand greater protection, but the community is developing and growing, said martial arts specialist Nargis Hazara. "Every one of us has a dream, a target and aim in our heart, to change the image of Hazaras in the world, and especially in Pakistan," added the 20-year-old who last year became Pakistan's first winner of an Asian Games medal in karate.

Many Hazaras have joined the armed forces in Pakistan, where the community's past and future will stay rooted despite any violence, said another martial arts expert, Mubarak Ali Shan. "We want to serve Pakistan and despite suffering tragedies and incidents, our love for peace has not diminished," he added. — Reuters

## 14 killed as mortars hit Afghan market

**KABUL:** At least 14 people were killed and dozens more wounded when a busy market in northern Afghanistan was hit by mortar fire, officials said yesterday.

Several Taliban shells hit the market Friday morning in the Khwaja Sabz Posh district of Faryab province, according to Hanif Rezaee, an Afghan army spokesman. "Fourteen civilians were killed and 40 — including women and children — were wounded," Rezaee said.

He said the Taliban had been trying to hit an army checkpoint near the market. The insurgent group did not immediately comment. Naem Musamim, Faryab's public health director, said 14 bodies and 39 wounded people including four children had been taken to local hospitals. Some victims with critical injuries were airlifted to hospitals in Mazar-i-Sharif in Balkh province.

Also Friday, a bomb detonated inside a Shia mosque in Ghazni city in central Afghanistan, killing two worshippers and wounding 20 more, according to Ghazni governor spokesman Aref Noori.

Baz Mohammad Hemat, the director of Ghazni hospital, told AFP that one of those killed and 14 of the wounded were children. Friday is Afghanistan's day off and many children attend mosque for prayers on the day of worship. The Islamic State group's Afghanistan affiliate, which has a grow-

ing footprint in the country, claimed responsibility. The Sunni extremists have conducted frequent prior attacks on Shia targets. While Afghanistan is a mainly Sunni country, it has a sizeable Shia minority, mainly represented by the Hazara community.

The deadly incidents come as the war between the Taliban and Afghan security forces rages on, even as Taliban officials are meeting with US negotiators in Doha in a bid to bring about an end to the conflict.

An agreement with the Taliban is expected to have two main points—a US withdrawal from Afghanistan and a commitment by the militants not to provide a base for terrorists, the main reason for the US invasion nearly 18 years ago. Today, the insurgents will meet in the Qatari capital with various representatives from Afghan society as part of a potential peace process.

Meanwhile, Islamic State fighters claimed responsibility yesterday for the deadly overnight attack in a mosque in central province of Ghazni in Afghanistan. At least two people were killed and 20 others sustained injuries as a bomb planted by the hardline Islamist militants inside the Mohammadiya mosque, used by Shiites, went off on Friday night, said Aref Noori, a provincial government spokesman.

Islamic State frequently targets Afghanistan's Shiite minority, which it calls "apostates". The militant group said 40 people were injured in the explosion. The explosive device was planted ahead of the Friday prayers, government officials said. Ghazni has recently been the scene of heavy clashes between government forces and Taliban militants. — Agencies

## Hell in high water: Braving the monsoon to save India's rhinos

**NEW DELHI:** The monsoon may bring respite from the scorching heat, but for the rangers and animals at Kaziranga National Park it also brings danger as poachers take advantage of greater camouflage and flooding.

The UNESCO-recognized reserve, home to two-thirds of the world's one-horned rhinos, draws hunters who can earn as much as \$150,000 for one horn on a black market serving foreign demand for its use in traditional Chinese medicine. Three rhinos have been killed so far this year. And in rainy season, it can be an especially gruelling battle—the grass reaches head-height, providing perfect cover for poachers and flooding forces the animals to move to higher ground, sometimes to the outskirts of the park.

"We are always on our toes in this season. There is hardly any rest for us. Information about poachers entering the park comes any time and we have to respond immediately," explains ranger Gopi Kanta Deka.

He and his dedicated colleagues-on duty constantly for weeks at a time in this period, sometimes sleeping out in the open-must follow the animals to protect them from harm.

"We walk in groups from one anti-poaching camp to another or paddle boats during high floods to reach those areas from where the information has come in and get to the job quickly," he adds.

### Vulnerable to extinction

The one-horned rhinos used to be wide-



A picture taken on May 28, 2019 shows a trio of white rhinoceros grazing at Ol-Pejeta conservancy at Laikipia's county headquarters, Nanyuki. — AFP

spread in the region but hunting and habitat loss has slashed their numbers to just a few thousand, almost all in the north-eastern state of Assam. Their main haven now is Kaziranga, with 2,413 of the animals living there, according to a 2018 count.

Although hunting them was outlawed in 1910, poaching has proliferated. Today the creatures—also known as the Indian rhinoceros and the greater one-horned rhinoceros—are listed as vulnerable on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List that assesses species' threat of extinction.

"We really feel bad when something bad like poaching happens to the animals," says ranger Manoj Gogoi. The 850-square-kilome-

tre (330-square-mile) park, created in 1908 after the wife of the British viceroy visited and complained there were no rhinos, is also home to tigers, elephants and panthers, all under threat from poaching. But it is the rhinos that are the big draw.

"There is huge demand for the horns and international rackets are pumping in huge amounts of money, prompting poachers sometimes to risk their own lives," wildlife activist Somyadeep Datta warns. Prized in some forms of traditional Chinese and South East Asian medicine, acolytes believe the horns containing keratin—the same protein in human hair and nails—can cure anything from cancer to cures, or can be used as an aphrodisiac. — AFP

## Thousands protest amid outcry over Myanmar child rape case

**YANGON:** Thousands of protesters marched to a police office in the north of Myanmar's largest city, Yangon, yesterday, demanding speedy and transparent justice in a child-rape case that has sparked national outrage.

Police said this week they had arrested a suspect in the rape of a toddler - nicknamed Victoria - at a private nursery school in the administrative capital, Naypyitaw, in May.

Social media users have criticized the speed and professionalism of the police response after the girl's family filed a complaint more than a month ago, underscoring a lack of trust in authorities in a country still emerging from decades of military rule. A government led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi took power after sweeping elections in 2015, but key institutions such as the police remain under military control and efforts to strengthen the rule of law have floundered.

Organizers estimated as many as 6,000 protesters gathered on Saturday at the Yangon office of the Criminal Investigation Department

(CID) wearing white t-shirts, some printed with the words "Justice for Victoria". One banner read: "We don't want any more Victorias."

"We need an explanation that people can accept and justice for the kid," said 33-year-old protest organizer Aung Htike Min. The protesters also called on the government to create a safe environment for Myanmar's children.

The police force's deputy director general, Aung Naing Thu, said on Friday in a news conference broadcast live on Facebook and watched by thousands of people that police had filed a case at court against a driver at the victim's nursery, who was in custody. A thorough investigation was conducted, he said, but efforts to identify the perpetrator had been delayed because officers were waiting to speak to the victim, a 3-year-old girl who was recovering from medication she was given after the assault.

"We filed the lawsuit against the suspect based on the testimony of the child and technical records," said Aung Naing Thu, referring to security-camera footage that he said implicated the driver. The nursery had also been closed because it lacked the correct license to operate, he said. Demonstrators were sceptical about the account given by Myanmar police, a force that is widely perceived as corrupt or incompetent.

Ye Myint Win, 37, who joined Saturday's protest along with his wife and 2-year-old daughter, told Reuters authorities should take child rape cases more seriously. "I found it very suspicious and I don't trust the investigation of CID," he said. — Reuters