

International

Released Australian student was 'spying,' says North Korea

Sigley freed and sent to Japan on Thursday

SEOUL: An Australian student who was released after being held in North Korea had been "spying" in the reclusive country, state media said yesterday. Alek Sigley, 29, disappeared around two weeks ago prompting deep concern about his fate, but was freed and flew to Japan on Thursday.

Official North Korean news agency KCNA said Sigley had admitted "he had been spying by collecting our internal information and sharing with others and repeatedly asked for our forgiveness for infringing on our sovereignty". It said Sigley—one of just a handful of Westerners living and studying in North Korea—had been detained on June 25 for promoting propaganda against the country online, including on specialist website NK News, which rejected the accusations.

"Sigley, upon request by anti-DPRK news outlets such as NK News, on numerous occasions transferred information that he gathered while travelling to every corner of Pyongyang using his status as an international student, including photographs and analysis," it said, using the initials of North Korea's official name. "The government of DPRK has exercised humanitarian forbearance and deported him from our grounds on July 4."

Sigley's detention came just days before a G20 summit and a landmark meeting between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Trump was closely involved in the case of University of Virginia student Otto Warmbier, who was imprisoned during a tour of the authoritarian state in 2016.

Doctors said Warmbier suffered severe brain damage while in detention, fell into a coma and died days after arriving back in the United States, aged 22. Sigley

was much more familiar with the country and spoke fluent Korean. He organized tours to North Korea, and ran a number of social media sites, which usually had a stream of apolitical content about life in one of the world's most secretive nations.

His blog posts focused on everyday Pyongyang—everything from the city's dining scene to North Korean app reviews—and he married his Japanese wife there last year.

No interviews

Chad O'Carroll, director of the NK News, said in a statement on Saturday that Sigley's columns for the site "presented an apolitical and insightful view of life in Pyongyang". "The six articles Alek published represent the full extent of his work with us and the idea that those columns, published transparently under his name between January and April 2019, are 'anti-state' in nature is a misrepresentation which we reject," he said. On Friday, Sigley said he was planning to "return to normal life" but offered no details of his detention, adding he would not be conducting any interviews or holding a press conference.

"I just want everyone to know I am OK, and to thank them for their concern for my wellbeing and their support for my family over the past week," he said in a statement released by representatives of his family on Friday. However Sigley gave no indication of why he was held, how he was treated or why he was released. It said he would not make any further comment "at this time or later".

The case was also complicated by Australia's lack of



BEIJING: Alek Sigley arrives at Beijing International Airport after being released from detention in China — Reuters

diplomatic representation in North Korea.

Sigley specifically thanked Sweden's envoy to North Korea, who helped negotiate his release. Also on Friday, Australia's Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton cautioned Sigley against returning to Pyongyang.

"My advice will be pretty clear—I would stay in Japan. I would go back to South Korea. I would come back to Australia. All of those would have to be better options before he returns to North Korea," Dutton told broadcaster channel Nine. — AFP

First charges against HK anti-govt protester

HONG KONG: A Hong Kong street artist was charged on Friday with assaulting a police officer and criminal damage, the first prosecution against an anti-government protester since the city was rocked by unprecedented demonstrations.

Sparked by a law that would have allowed extraditions to mainland China, the city has witnessed three huge peaceful rallies as well as civil disobedience and violence from a hard core of younger protesters who have besieged the police headquarters and on Monday stormed the city's parliament.

Authorities have vowed to hunt those behind the unrest that has plunged the semi-autonomous city's Beijing-backed government into crisis. Pun Ho-chiu, 31, appeared in court on Friday over his alleged involvement in the blockade of the city's police headquarters on 21 June.

He was also charged with disorderly behavior for throwing eggs at police outside the headquarters during the six-hour siege. A well-known activist nicknamed "Painter" for his street art, Pun was remanded in custody and faces up to ten years in jail if convicted.

He was one of the only protesters during the police siege to show himself unmasked.

In court his lawyer said he was assaulted by police who spoke to him in Mandarin—the predominant language on the Chinese mainland. The judge said the court could not investigate the claims and directed him to the police complaints procedure. Forensic investigators have been combing through the trashed parliament for fingerprint and DNA evidence to help identify protesters who stormed the building and left its walls daubed with slogans such as "HK is not China" and a



SHENZHEN: Policemen hold hands to line up and surround protesters during a demonstration in the north-western district of Tuen Mun, near the border with the Chinese city of Shenzhen, in Hong Kong yesterday. — AFP

colonial-era flag pinned to the legislature's podium. An AFP tally shows at least 66 arrests have been announced by police since the protests began. But it is not clear how many of those people have been charged and police did not respond to requests for a breakdown.

'Mothers rally'

The unrest presents the most severe challenge to Beijing and Hong Kong's leaders since the city's handover to China. Critics say Beijing has ratcheted up control over the city in recent years, stamping down on dissidents and refusing calls for universal suffrage.

While the current protests were sparked by huge public opposition to the extradition bill they have since morphed into a broad anti-government movement. On Friday evening thousands of Hong Kong mothers rallied at a park in the commercial district of Central in support of those who ransacked parliament. Didi Cheng, who has a 25-year-old daughter, told AFP the protesters who stormed the building "had no other choice".

"After two mass rallies, the cold-blooded government had no response," the 53-year-old said. "I have to come out to show my support for the youngsters, to tell them I stand with them."

City leader Carrie Lam has postponed the extradition legislation but has failed to quell public anger. Protesters have demanded she withdraw the bill entirely, launch an independent inquiry into police use of tear gas and rubber bullets, and step down.

Chief secretary Matthew Chueng-Lam's de facto deputy-held talks with pro-democracy lawmakers which he said were "constructive" but there was no suggestion of a breakthrough.

"My meeting with the pan-democrats just now was very useful in the sense that it's the first time we've really had an opportunity to sit down and talk candidly and frankly over the issues," he told reporters. Since the parliament siege Beijing has vocally thrown its support behind Lam, calling on Hong Kong authorities to pursue all those involved in the ransacking. — AFP

Indonesia jails woman reporting sexual harassment

JAKARTA: Indonesia's Supreme Court has jailed a woman who tried to report her employer for alleged sexual harassment, in a ruling that rights groups said on Friday risked turning victims of sexual abuse into criminals. The Supreme Court found Baiq Nuril Maknun, who was a teacher on the island of Lombok, guilty of violating strict anti-pornography laws. It overturned her acquittal by a lower court and jailed her for six months.

She was also ordered to pay a 500 million rupiah (\$35,383) fine. The Supreme Court's Thursday decision cannot be appealed. "We are concerned about the impact of this decision because it opens a door for perpetrators of sexual violence to criminalize victims," said Ade Wahyudin, executive director of the Legal Aid Foundation for the Press.

Maknun had complained of getting lewd phone calls from the principal of a high school where she worked from 2012, court documents showed. She recorded some of the phone calls without the knowledge of the headmaster and gave a recording to a third person, and distributed it on an electronic device, which resulted in the principal losing his job, the documents showed. — Reuters

China briefed by US on latest Trump-Kim meeting

BEIJING: China has received a briefing from the United States on the latest meeting between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, China's Foreign Ministry said yesterday, in a call between two senior diplomats.

Trump became the first sitting US president to set foot in North Korea on Sunday when he met Kim in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) at Panmunjom between the two Koreas and agreed to resume stalled nuclear talks. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui and US Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun discussed that meeting in a telephone call on Friday, China's Foreign Ministry said in a short statement.

"Biegun introduced the meeting between the US and North Korean leaders at Panmunjom, and said the US side is willing to strengthen communication

and coordination with the Chinese side on the peninsula issue," the ministry added. Luo told Biegun the recent "positive interactions" on the North Korean issue by all parties had important meaning for the peace talks process, the ministry said.

"China supports US-North Korea exchanges and dialogue and hopes that the two sides will meet each other halfway and follow the consensus of the leaders of the two countries to resume consultations at the working level as soon as possible," it added. Trump's meeting with Kim came around a week after Chinese President Xi Jinping met Kim himself during a state visit to Pyongyang.

While China has not officially announced it, Luo is likely China's new special envoy for the North Korea issue, after predecessor Kong Xuanyou became China's new ambassador in Tokyo in late May.

Luo was also involved in a briefing to Chinese reporters on Xi's visit to North Korea before Xi went, according to state media. Luo is an urbane career diplomat who speaks good English, according to diplomats who have met him. He previously served as China's ambassador in Canada, Pakistan and India, and also worked in the Chinese embassy in Washington from 1996-2000. — Reuters

US lawmakers urge sanctions over China's Xinjiang crackdown

WASHINGTON: US lawmakers on Friday renewed their call for sanctions against China's top official in the Xinjiang region on the anniversary of riots that left nearly 200 dead.

China cracked down hard after the July 5, 2009 rampage in Urumqi, the region's capital. Around one million Uighurs or members of other mostly Muslim, Turkic-speaking communities have been detained in a vast network of camps in the name of counterterrorism. More than 40 US lawmakers across the political spectrum on April 3 called on the Trump administration to slap sanctions on Chen Quanguo, the Communist Party secretary in Xinjiang. But the chairs of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, a US government body that monitors human rights in the country, said the administration has not yet responded to the letter.

"On this sad anniversary, we reiterate that call to hold Chinese officials accountable," said the chairs, Republican Senator Marco Rubio and

Democratic Representative Jim McGovern. "The Chinese government has operated with impunity in (Xinjiang) for far too long," they wrote.

The Trump administration has repeatedly denounced China's treatment of Uighurs, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo likening the mass detention to Nazi-era concentration camps.

Rubio and McGovern wrote: "The rhetoric has been tough, but it's not enough, given the egregious scope of abuses." Administration officials say they are studying sanctions, but the issue comes as Trump is already embroiled in a range of disputes with China, including a simmering trade war.

China describes its camps as vocational training centers where Uighurs learn job skills and Mandarin and are dissuaded from embracing extremism. But former detainees say they were indoctrinated for merely following Islamic traditions, such as wearing long beards or face veils. — AFP

Japan PM Abe's coalition on track to win solid majority

TOKYO: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's coalition is on track to win a solid majority in a July 21 upper house election, and his dream of revising the pacifist constitution could still be alive if enough allies also win, a survey showed yesterday.

Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its coalition partner Komeito are expected to win more than 63 seats, a majority of the 124 seats contested, the poll taken by the Kyodo news agency on Thursday and Friday showed. They could win as many as 77 seats, it said. Other surveys, including those taken by the Asahi and Sankei newspapers, also showed Abe's coalition parties with a good chance of

winning a majority of the seats up for re-election.

However, many voters are still undecided and the outcome could change. Upper house elections are held every three years, with members' terms running for six years. The LDP won a landslide victory in 2013 but fared less well in 2016. Reforms last year increased the number of seats in the upper house by three to 245.

Attention will also focus on whether the ruling bloc, along with the smaller Japan Innovation Party and independents, retain a two-thirds "super majority" needed to revise the post-war pacifist constitution, a long-held goal for Abe.

Abe is highlighting his call to revise the post-war constitution to further legitimise Japan's Self-Defense Forces, as its military is known.

Media reports said pro-revision forces needed to win 85 of the seats being contested to have a two-thirds majority. A constitutional revision requires approval by two thirds of both chambers of parliament and a majority in a public referendum. — Reuters



TOKYO: Japan's Prime Minister and ruling Liberal Democratic Party leader Shinzo Abe (left) speaks beside Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan leader Yukio Edano (right) during seven party leaders' debate at the Japan National Press Club in Tokyo. — AFP