

International

Xi, Macron unite on climate as US withdraws from Paris pact

World's largest economy the sole major outlier from the agreement

BEIJING: Chinese leader Xi Jinping and French President Emmanuel Macron declared yesterday that the Paris climate pact was "irreversible" showing a united front after Washington formally withdrew from the accord this week. The joint declaration came at the end of Macron's second visit to China, which started on Monday in Shanghai and included talks on trade and the Iranian nuclear issue.

The French leader also said he told Xi there was a need for dialogue to resolve months of unrest in Hong Kong — ignoring Beijing's prior warning that such sensitive topics should not be on the agenda. But Xi and Macron found common ground on climate change. Major powers expressed regret and concern after President Donald Trump went ahead with the pullout from the Paris accord despite mounting evidence of the reality and impact of climate change.

Washington presented its withdrawal letter to the United Nations on Monday, the first possible date under the accord negotiated by Trump's predecessor Barack Obama, making the world's largest economy the sole major outlier from the agreement. In a joint written statement, Xi and Macron reaffirmed "their firm support for the Paris accord which they consider as an irreversible process and a compass for strong action on climate".

Without directly naming the US, Macron said he "deplores the choices made by others" as he sat next to Xi following the talks at the imposing Great Hall of the People in the Chinese capital. "But I want to look at them as marginal choices," Macron said. With the European Union, China and Russia backing the pact, he added, "the isolated choice of one or another is not enough to change the course of the world. It only leads to marginalization."

'Law of the jungle'

In his remarks, Xi took a veiled swipe at the United States, which launched a trade war with China last year

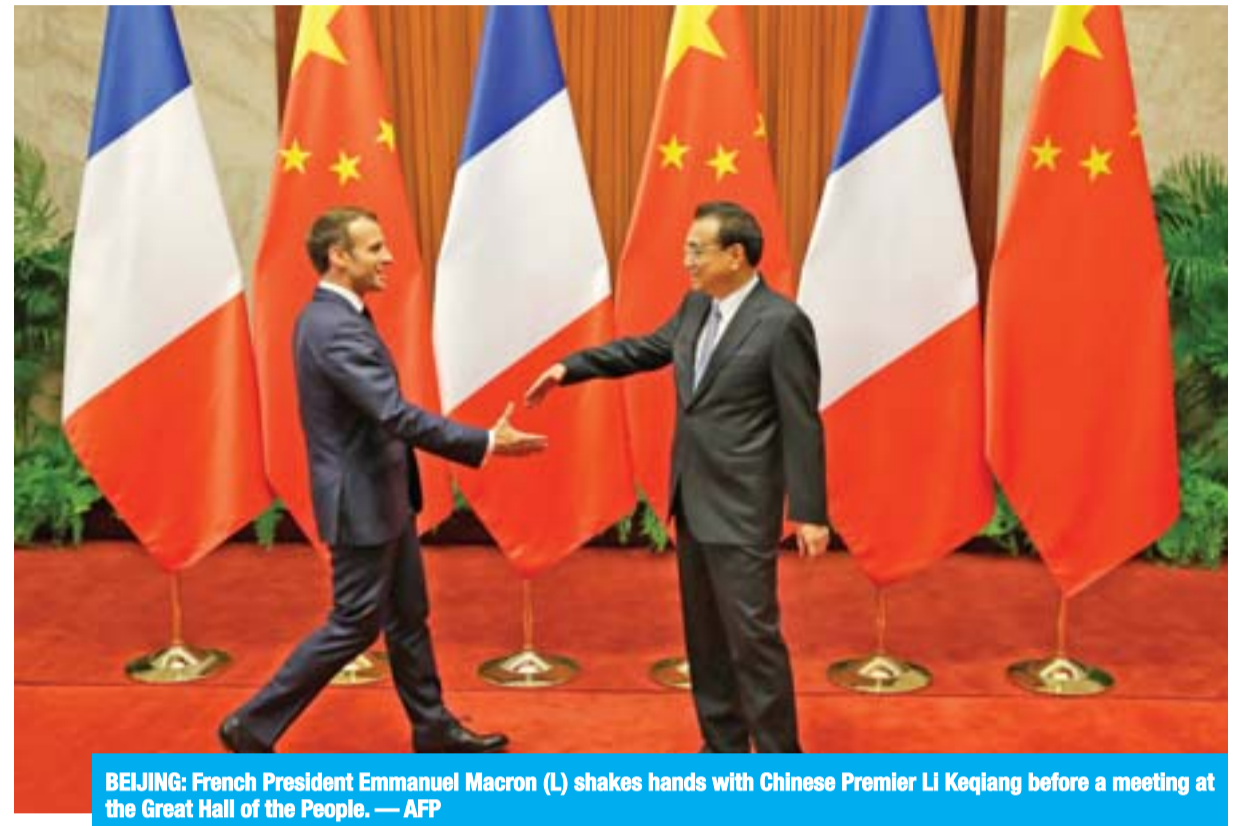
and has angered Beijing on various diplomatic issues. "We advocate for mutual respect and equal treatment, and are opposed to the law of the jungle and acts of intimidation," Xi said. "We advocate for openness, inclusion and for mutually beneficial cooperation, and are opposed to protectionism and a zero-sum game."

China's efforts against climate change are key as it is the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases. Xi also called on the international community to "jointly protect our homeland planet Earth", saying "we are against the attempt to place national interests above the common interests of humanity". In a document titled the "Beijing Call for Biodiversity Conservation and Climate Change", the two leaders voiced their determination to improve international cooperation to "ensure a complete and efficient implementation of the Paris accord". The document includes a commitment to restoring almost a third of degraded land as well as eliminating fossil fuel subsidies in the medium term.

Unrest in Hong Kong

After the meeting, Macron said at a news conference at the French embassy that he had raised the unrest in Hong Kong during his talks with Xi. "I obviously conveyed our concerns, which are shared by Europe," Macron said, adding that he told Xi that there was a need for "de-escalation through dialogue." The international finance hub has been convulsed by five months of huge and increasingly violent protests calling for greater democratic freedoms.

A Chinese foreign ministry official had warned prior to Macron's visit that Hong Kong was a matter of China's internal affairs and should not be on the diplomatic agenda. But it did not stop the two sides from striking deals, including an agreement to protect 200 European and Chinese agricultural products — whose names are tied to their regions — against counterfeiting, from Champagne



BEIJING: French President Emmanuel Macron (L) shakes hands with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang before a meeting at the Great Hall of the People. — AFP

to Feta cheese and Panjin rice.

The two sides also committed to signing by January 31 a contract for the construction of a nuclear fuel recycling plant in China, which would involve French energy

giant Orano. On Iran, Macron said the two countries agreed to deepen joint efforts to convince Tehran to "fully respect its obligations" under the 2015 nuclear deal with major powers. — AFP

Duterte foe accepts anti-drug war post

MANILA: A fierce critic of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's deadly anti-drug war accepted a top post yesterday to help steer the campaign, pledging to halt killings of the innocent. While critics said the appointment is an effort to tarnish an adversary, the move will put Leni Robredo in the cockpit of the internationally condemned crackdown.

Duterte offered the post to Robredo, who is vice president but was elected separately, after her repeated criticism of a campaign that has killed thousands. "I want to fix the campaign against illegal drugs, stop the killing of innocents and bring to account abusive officials," Robredo told a press conference. She will be the co-chair of a committee responsible for overseeing the crackdown, which was until now led by the national anti-drugs agency.

Duterte critics were skeptical of the appointment, with Senator Lila de Lima calling it a "silly trap". The president wants to "create the narrative of putting all the blame of his failures on someone else", added De Lima, who is imprisoned on drug charges she says are politically moti-



BANGKOK: Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte attends the plenary session of the 35th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit. — AFP

vated. Opinion polls say the drug war has the overwhelming backing of Filipinos, yet it has high-profile critics among opposition politicians, the powerful Catholic church and advocacy groups.

'Brink of surrender'

Foreign institutions have also stepped in to question the

killings, including International Criminal Court prosecutors who have launched a preliminary probe. Drug agents say they have killed just over 5,500 alleged dealers and users who fought back during arrest, but watchdogs say the true toll is at least four times higher.

Advocates allege the campaign is a war on the urban poor which has had the side effect of unleashing a rush of killings linked to everything from personal disputes to political rivalries. Duterte's spokesman Salvador Panelo has denied the appointment was an effort to drag Robredo into the morass of the campaign to co-opt her. "Effectively, we're giving her a ladder to the presidency. This is her chance," Panelo said on Tuesday.

Duterte has previously derided Robredo's capability to potentially lead the country, which she would have to do if the president dies or cannot function. But in a turnaround labeled by critics as a trap, Duterte said in a speech last week that the drug situation has "worsened" with the police on the "brink of surrendering". "It's beyond my competence, but maybe she will do better," Duterte told reporters last week.

Several members of Duterte's cabinet said they would work with Robredo in good faith, but not all of them were so welcoming. C'mon Leni, let's try something new. Except legalizing the drug trade, rehabbing drug dealers instead shootin' 'em", foreign secretary Teodoro Locsin wrote in a tweet. — AFP

15 killed in alleged rebel attacks in Thailand's south

YALA: At least fifteen people were gunned down in an ambush by suspected Muslim militants in Thailand's violence-wracked south, an army spokesman said yesterday, one of the bloodiest days in the 15-year insurgency. Thailand's three southernmost provinces have been in the grip of a conflict that has killed more than 7,000 people, as Malay-Muslim militants fight for more autonomy from the Thai state.

Despite the high death toll, the highly localized unrest garners few international headlines. The region is heavily controlled by the police and the military, with residents and rights groups accusing them of heavy-handed tactics. Villagers trained and armed by security forces are also enlisted to monitor remote villages, though they are rarely targeted by the rebels. This changed late Tuesday when militants struck two checkpoints in Yala province manned by civilian defense volunteers, opening fire on them as a group of villagers stopped to talk, southern army spokesman Pramote Prom-in told AFP.

In the largest death toll in years, "twelve were killed at the scene, two more (died) at the hospital, and one died this morning", said Pramote, adding that five others were injured. The attackers took M-16 rifles and shotguns from the checkpoints, he said. "These acts were by militants." Nails were also scattered on the roads in an apparent effort to slow the security forces, the army said in a separate statement.

A bomb squad was dispatched yesterday morning to investigate and detonate an explosive device suspected to have been left by fleeing attackers about three kilometers from one checkpoint. The southern army commander told reporters that the attackers were targeting "weak points". "This is just to gain the headlines and scare Thai people nationwide," said Pornsak Poonsawasdi. Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha said the perpetrators must "be brought to justice", according to Defense Ministry spokesman Kongcheep Tantravanich.

Tit-for-tat attacks

Rebels seeking autonomy for the culturally distinct region bordering Malaysia have been fighting the Buddhist-majority Thai state, which colonized the area over a century ago. The conflict is characterized by tit-for-tat attacks that usually target symbols of the Thai state and its security forces but civilians from both Muslim and Buddhist communities often get caught in the crossfire.

The violence has bled into tourist destinations, like in 2012 when a series of car bombs in Songkhla province's Hat Yai killed 13 people. The incidents have been fewer



YALA: The body of a person killed in an attack by suspected Muslim militants is brought to a hospital in Yala province. — AFP

in recent years, but the hits have become "more intense", said Don Pathan, an expert on the so-called Deep South. Tuesday's attack marked the largest coordinated effort "in a very long time", he added. It comes days after Bangkok hosted the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit, which brought head of states from all over the world — along with hundreds of foreign journalists.

"It (the attack) is a reminder that they are still here," Pathan said. Civilian defense volunteers rarely draw the rebels' ire "unless if they cross the line and become part of the government security apparatus", he added. The rebels accuse the state of railroading their distinct culture as well as carrying out routine abuses which go unpunished. The latest incident stoking outrage in the region was the death in August of Abdulloh Esomusor, a Muslim man who was detained by the military and left in a coma after being interrogated at a notorious Thai detention centre.

Suspects are routinely taken for interrogation and held under emergency laws in detention centers where rights groups have documented torture. Days after Abdulloh's detention, four people were killed in a late-night attack on a military outpost, fuelling speculation of a retaliatory operation. A week later, several small bombs exploded in Bangkok, injuring four people as the city hosted a major summit attended by top diplomats, including US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Thailand has linked the bombs to southern insurgents — though no group ever claimed responsibility for the attacks. — AFP

Thai PM says Cambodian oppn leader not allowed to transit

BANGKOK: Thailand will not allow Cambodian opposition leader Sam Rainsy to transit through the kingdom in a bid to return to Phnom Penh, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha said yesterday. Rainsy, who has lived in France since 2015 to avoid jail for convictions he says are politically motivated, has promised a dramatic homecoming on November 9, Cambodia's Independence Day.

But Cambodia's strongman premier Hun Sen has said repeatedly that arrest warrants for his arch-rival have been sent to neighboring countries and troops deployed at the Thai-Cambodian border to stop his return. Prayut confirmed that authorities are on the lookout for Rainsy and any key opposition members. "We will not allow anti-government (parties) to use Thailand as a base," the Thai leader said in an apparent reference to Rainsy's Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP).

The CNRP was dissolved in the lead-up to last year's heavily criticized elections in Cambodia, which Hun Sen's party swept, turning the country into a one-party state. Since then, key opposition members have fled the country. Police have rounded up dozens of opposition activists in recent weeks ahead of Rainsy's planned return. In neighboring Thailand, authorities were sent photos of the opposition members and Rainsy — who on Tuesday posted a Thai Airways stub on social media showing a seat in his name on a Paris to Bangkok flight on Friday.

But Prayut said authorities have been told to stop him. "I do not think he will be able to enter (Thailand)," he said. Hun Sen has ruled Cambodia for 34 years, but the CNRP and Rainsy — who analysts say remains a popular symbol for change — are thorns in his side. The tensions were on display Wednesday when the Cambodian ambassador to Indonesia Hor Nambora stormed a press conference by deputy CNRP leader Mu Sochua — who is also planning to return to Phnom Penh to support Rainsy.

Organizer Darmawan Triwibowo of pro-democracy NGO Kurawal Foundation said they rebuffed the ambassador's demands that the "illegal" event be cancelled. The embassy later issued a press release calling for Mu Sochua's arrest and immediate deportation to Cambodia, citing her status as a "fugitive". In Malaysia meanwhile, two opposition activists — one of them an asylum seeker — were detained as they were boarding flights to Thailand, Human Rights Watch's Phil Robertson told AFP, adding that they will face imprisonment if deported to Cambodia. "Freedom of expression and association have been so destroyed in Cambodia that now its diplomats think they can extend their rights-violating tactics overseas," Robertson said.

Dramatic shooting

In other news, an American drug suspect and his Thai wife who went on the run after they shot and stabbed their way out of a courtroom were apprehended Wednesday, authorities said, with the man shooting his wife and then himself as police closed in.

The couple, along with an associate, had made their brazen and violent escape from a court holding room in the seedy southern city of Pattaya on Monday, wounding a police officer before fleeing in a pick-up truck. But yesterday they were tracked down in Sa Kaeo province, which shares a border with Cambodia, with the American taking his wife hostage in the ensuing standoff with police. "The foreign suspect shot his wife, and then himself," Sattawat Hiranburana, assistant to the national police chief, told AFP, adding that the American had sustained "serious" injuries. The wife was also wounded though in a less critical condition, Sattawat said. The couple are facing death penalty charges for drug trafficking, although sentences are rarely carried out. — AFP

Dengue cases soar to record high in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD: A record-breaking 44,000 people have been infected with mosquito-borne dengue in Pakistan this year, a senior health official said yesterday, as increased outbreaks linked to rising temperatures and erratic rainfall ravage other parts of Asia. Dr Rana Safdar, a senior official at the National Institute of Health (NIH), told AFP the figure is a huge leap from the previous record of 27,000 infections in 2011.

Safdar said 66 people had been killed by the disease so far in 2019, compared to 370 in 2011. He blamed climate change for the surge, but would not elaborate. The government was "employing all available resources at its disposal to contain the problem", he said. Physician Dr Mahseema Siddique, who treats dengue patients, blamed the government for the rise in cases, saying local authorities in Punjab and Islamabad in particular had failed to take precautions such as covering up water reservoirs or spraying anti-dengue chemicals.

"They woke up only after hundreds of people got infected and that was too late. There are a large number of areas where spray teams could not make it," he said. The highest number of patients was recorded in the capital Islamabad and neighboring garrison city of Rawalpindi, where 12,433 people were found infected with the virus. Dengue is transmitted mainly by the Aedes Aegypti mosquito, which thrives in densely-populated tropical climates and breeds in stagnant pools of water.

Mosquitoes pick up the virus from infected humans — even asymptomatic ones — and pass it along to other people through bites. Infections have steadily climbed across the globe since the 1970s due to rising temperatures and irregular monsoon rains linked to climate change, which allow for ideal mosquito breeding conditions.

But this year outbreaks have rampaged through Southeast Asia in particular, infecting hundreds of thousands, killing hundreds, and crippling health care systems as governments struggle to contain the untreatable virus. Dengue is mostly found in crowded areas, and breakneck urbanization across the globe has helped the virus thrive. Dubbed "breakbone fever", it inflicts sufferers with intense flu-like symptoms: severe headache, pain behind the eyes, full-body aches, high fever, nausea, vomiting, swollen glands or rash. — AFP