

International

India and Australia seal deal to use each other's military bases

Modi and Morrison hold virtual summit

NEW DELHI: India and Australia sealed a deal yesterday to get access to each other's military bases, the Indian foreign ministry said - a pact that would clear the way for more military exchanges and exercises in the Indo-Pacific.

The mutual logistic support agreement was signed during a virtual summit between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Australian counterpart Scott Morrison.

India has a similar pact with the United States which is seen as part of a broader security cooperation to balance China's growing economic and military weight in the region.

The agreement to provide access to each other's military bases in line with a similar accord that India has struck with the United States is seen as part of a broader strategy to counter China's military and economic weight in the region.

Indian troops are locked in a standoff with Chinese troops on their disputed border, the most serious crisis in years, on top of concerns about a huge trade imbalance in Beijing's favor.

Australia's trade frictions with China are also

growing and its push last month for an international review into the origins and spread of the novel coronavirus drew opposition from China. Morrison was due in India in January but was forced to cancel the trip because of the bushfires crisis in Australia. The holding of the summit now, in the middle of the pandemic, showed the importance the two leaders attached to bilateral ties, officials said.

"This is the first time that Prime Minister Modi will be holding a 'Bilateral Virtual Summit', this signifies the strengthening of ties with Australia and its upward trajectory," Indian foreign ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava said. The Mutual Logistics Support Agreement under which military ships and aircraft can refuel and access maintenance facilities at each other's bases is ready for signing, another official said.

India is also considering Australia's participation in annual naval exercises it holds with the United States and Japan in the Indian and Pacific Ocean in a cementing of security ties between the four countries, military officials said. A similar exercise in 2007 had angered China. —Reuters



NEW DELHI: A man wearing a facemask watches on a monitor as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks during a bilateral virtual summit with Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison from his office in New Delhi yesterday. —AFP

Japan's 'mosh pit' trains spark fear of new virus cases

TOKYO: As Japan returns to work from coronavirus restrictions, its notoriously crowded trains - almost a symbol of its celebrated work ethic - are raising fears about a resurgence of infections.

Authorities in Tokyo had hoped to solve the problem of crowded commuting with staggered hours and remote working but the trains appeared almost back to normal yesterday, days after the lifting of a coronavirus emergency.

Health experts and politicians have blamed night spots and concert venues, known as live houses, for cultivating clusters of infection and have advised them to stay closed. But while no coronavirus cases have been linked to trains, many Tokyo residents say they are just as packed as any nightclub.

"It's such a contradiction that crowded trains are OK but live houses still can't open," said Twitter user Rimiken. "Crowded trains are like a music festival. They're a festival mosh pit."

Tokyo recorded 34 new infections on Tuesday, the highest daily increase since early May.

The Tokyo Metro subway is taking steps to prevent infections with open carriage windows and the disinfecting of ticket machines, spokesman Hisao Asano said. But it has no plan to limit passenger numbers or insist on spacing, he said.

"Given the various needs of our customers, we're not thinking about such a blanket restriction," Asano said. But a study by one of Japan's top research institutes indicated it may have to. The Riken Center for Computational Science found that even with open windows, the air flow concentrated above passengers' heads on crowded trains. —Reuters

Virus spreads in Taliban bastions

KUNDUZ: The Taliban boasted of their readiness to fight the deadly coronavirus when it first reached Afghanistan, but now the insurgents are struggling to curb its spread in their strongholds. For months, Habib Rahman, a resident of a Taliban-controlled area in the south of the country, has been unable to test whether his persistent cough is due to the virus.

"I have a cough, fever and chest pain," said Rahman, 32, who owns a grocery store in Helmand province. "There is neither a center here to diagnose or treat coronavirus patients, nor is there any effort to create awareness of the disease. Official figures show Afghanistan has more than 17,000 confirmed cases—including thousands in Taliban-controlled territories. But an overall shortage of testing kits, medical supplies and a dilapidated health system were compounding problems in tackling the spread, said Ahmed Saeedi, an independent analyst.

Years of war have left Afghanistan with a crumbling health sector, hampering the government's fight against COVID-19. In an attempt to bolster their narrative that they can run Afghanistan better than the struggling administration, the Taliban launched a campaign to tackle the virus in March.

They posted images online showing insurgents distributing masks and soap to villagers—albeit without any social distancing. In one image, masked militants wearing white protective suits check residents' temperatures and explain about personal hygiene as a machinegun is seen on a nearby table.

Disbelief about virus

The virus entered Afghanistan as infected migrants returned from neighboring Iran, the region's worst-hit country, and the Taliban ordered hundreds of returnees into quarantine. In some areas they controlled, the insurgents allowed government health officials to monitor the virus's spread—something rare for a group blamed for the deaths of dozens of medics over the years.

But in recent weeks, residents from provinces such as Kunduz, Helmand, Uruzgan and Kandahar—where the Taliban hold sway over large areas—complain they have been abandoned to their fate. In Kunduz, where the militants fought a fierce night battle before a short nationwide ceasefire last month, insurgents have barred medics.



In this file photo, Taliban prisoners walk in line during their release from the Bagram prison, next to the US military base in Bagram, some 50 km north of Kabul. —AFP

"They said they would handle the virus on their own," said Sebghatullah, a doctor from a nearby district, worried about the residents' lack of awareness when it came to personal hygiene. Haji Quadratullah, a resident of Helmand, said he recently saw a group of Taliban fighters film a promotional video at a neighborhood clinic, but they never returned. "I have not seen anybody do anything to raise awareness about the virus here," he said.

Taliban commanders insist they are helping fight the virus. "People who are suffering from high fever, cough and body pain... are taken to Trinkot," said Hafez Mohammad, a Taliban commander, referring to the capital of Uruzgan province.

Even during the Taliban's rule in the late 1990s, Afghanistan's health sector was hit by poor infrastructure, little international aid and underpaid medics. The disease is also sweeping through the Taliban itself, with several high-level militants believed to be sick with COVID-19, according to international media reports. The group denies any of their senior leaders are ill.

In his annual message marking the Eid holiday, the Taliban's top leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada, urged people to seek medical help for the disease. But he also insisted the virus was caused by mankind's "transgression against Allah's religion". —AFP