

## International

## Philippines' Duterte condemns South China Sea latest flare-up

EU calls on 'all parties to respect freedom of navigation and overflight in South China Sea'

BEIJING: Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte yesterday condemned the latest flare-up in the disputed South China Sea after Chinese coastguard ships fired water cannon at Filipino boats. Duterte made the remarks at an Asian regional summit hosted by Chinese President Xi Jinping, who vowed his country would "never seek hegemony, and certainly not bully the small".

China claims almost all of the waterway, through which trillions of dollars in trade passes annually, with competing claims from Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. Beijing has ignored a 2016 ruling by The Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration that its historical claim is without basis.

Tensions over the resource-rich sea spiked last week when Chinese coastguard vessels fired water cannon at Philippine boats delivering supplies to Filipino marines on Second Thomas Shoal, in the contested Spratly Islands. Manila expressed outrage at the incident, but Beijing said the Philippine boats had entered its waters without permission.



China claims almost all of the waterway

"We abhor the recent event in the Ayungin Shoal and view with grave concern other similar developments," Duterte told the meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and China, using the Filipino name for the shoal. "This does not speak well of the relations between our nations and our partnership."

Duterte's remarks were unusually strong for a leader who has fostered warmer ties with Beijing since taking power in 2016 in the hope of extracting promised investment and trade. It is not clear if Xi was par-

ticipating in the meeting when Duterte spoke.

For his part, Xi told the gathering "we must jointly maintain the stability of the South China Sea and build the South China Sea into a sea of peace, friendship, and cooperation". The renewed tensions over the waters have drawn international concern.

The United States on Friday warned China that an armed attack against Philippine public vessels would invite a US response under its treaty obligations to the Southeast Asian nation. The European Union also called on "all parties to respect freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea".

Philippines Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said the supply boats would resume their mission to Second Thomas Shoal after China's ambassador to the Philippines gave assurances they would not be impeded. China controls several reefs in the South China Sea including Scarborough Shoal—which Beijing seized from Manila in 2012 — just 240 kilometres (150 miles) west of the main Philippine island of Luzon.

It has asserted its stance by building up small



Philippine's President Rodrigo Duterte

shoals and reefs into military bases with airstrips and port facilities. After China occupied Mischief Reef in the mid-1990s, the Philippines marooned a derelict navy vessel atop the nearby Second Thomas Shoal to assert Manila's territorial claim. Members of the Philippine marines are based there. —AFP



CANBERRA: Handout photo taken and released on November 22, 2021 by the Australian Defence Force shows US Charge d'Affaires Michael Goldman (2nd L) signing the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement as Australia's Minister for Defence Peter Dutton (2nd R) and British High Commissioner Victoria Treadell (R) look on during a ceremony at Parliament House in Canberra. — AFP

## US, Australia, UK sign key deal in nuke sub alliance

SYDNEY: Australia formally embarked yesterday on a hotly-contested programme to equip its navy with nuclear-powered submarines in a new defence alliance with Britain and the United States. Defence Minister Peter Dutton joined US and British diplomats in signing an agreement allowing the exchange of sensitive "naval nuclear propulsion information" between their nations.

It is the first agreement on the technology to be publicly signed since the three countries announced in September the formation of a defence alliance, AUKUS, to confront strategic tensions in the Pacific where China-US rivalry is growing.

The deal will help Australia to complete an 18-month study into the submarine procurement, Dutton said after signing it in Canberra with US Charge d'Affaires Michael Goldman and British High Commissioner (ambassador) Victoria Treadell.

Details of the procurement have yet to be decided,

including whether Australia will opt for a vessel based on US or British nuclear-powered attack submarines. "With access to the information this agreement delivers, coupled with the decades of naval nuclear-powered experience our UK and US partners have, Australia will also be positioned to be responsible and reliable stewards of this technology," Dutton said in a statement.

Ahead of the signing, US President Joe Biden said in a memorandum approving the deal on Friday that it would improve the three countries' "mutual defence posture". Under the AUKUS deal, Australia would obtain eight state-of-the-art, nuclear-powered but conventionally armed submarines capable of stealthy, long-range missions. It also provides for sharing cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum and unspecified undersea capabilities.

The agreement has angered China, which describes it as an "extremely irresponsible" threat to stability in the region. It has also infuriated France, which discovered at the last moment that its own diesel-electric submarine contract with Australia—recently estimated to be worth Aus\$90 billion (\$65 billion) — had been scrapped.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has been unapologetic about his handling of the agreement, insisting it was in his country's national interest and that he knew it would "ruffle some feathers". — AFP

## Deadly air strikes on bandit camps in NW Nigeria

KANO: Air strikes targeting camps of gangs of cattle thieves in northwest Nigeria's Sokoto state, near the border with Niger, killed many people, local sources said Sunday. Nigerian military jets on Saturday bombed two camps in Isa district controlled by two gangs that have carried out deadly attacks on remote villages in recent weeks, the sources said. This was the first such attack on bandits in the region. But heavily armed gangs of cattle thieves and kidnappers for ransom known locally as bandits have terrorized northwest and central Nigeria for years, raiding and looting villages, and attacks have intensified in recent months.

"The military conducted aerial attacks on Tsaika and Dangwandi villages, where large numbers of bandits were killed," a local administrator in Isa district said. "It is hard to say how many were killed but the toll is quite high as the camps were strewn with corpses of the bandits," said the local official who asked not to be named. The fighter jets struck the two camps in simultaneous attacks, leading to large-scale "human and material damage to the terrorists," a security source in the region said. "The two camps have been scorched and dead bodies and pulverized structures litter the camps," said the security source.

The news of the attack was slow to emerge due to lack of telecommunication in the area. Both sources spoke from the state capital Sokoto, 80 kilometers away. Troops have been conducting ground and air offensives on bandit camps in neighboring Zamfara state since September, and bandits fleeing the operation there have moved into neighboring Sokoto and Katsina states. Authorities have shut down telecom infrastructure in Zamfara and parts of Kaduna and Katsina and Sokoto states to disrupt communication between the gangs. —AFP

## Maduro government scores major victory in regional vote

CARACAS: The government of Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro, whose 2018 election is not recognized by part of the international community, won a landslide victory in Sunday's regional ballot, according to election officials. Candidates aligned with Maduro have won 20 of the 23 governor posts and the mayorship of the capital Caracas in the face of a divided opposition running in an election for the first time in three years.

The European Union deployed an observer mission for the first time in 15 years to observe the polls that will see the new government seek the lifting of international sanctions on Venezuela while the opposition tries to rebuild in time for the 2024 elections. The mission will present a report today. Sunday's turnout was 41.8 percent, according to official provisional results after 90.21 percent of ballots were counted.

The opposition won three states including oil-rich Zulia, the country's most populous region whose capital Maracaibo is Venezuela's second-largest city. "Beautiful triumph, beautiful victory," Maduro said of the results. Before the announcement, opposition figure Henrique Capriles expressed reservations about the late closure of polling stations facilitating fraud. "Maduro and his party ordered the CNE (electoral body) not to close the polling stations when there were no voters... They are going to put votes that do not exist," he said on Twitter. — AFP

## Australia to re-open borders to students, skilled workers

SYDNEY: Australia announced yesterday it will re-open to foreign students and skilled workers from next month, easing some of the world's most stringent pandemic travel restrictions. Twenty months after Australia slammed shut its borders, some visa holders—as well as Japanese and South Korean citizens—will be able to enter from December 1.

"Australia is re-opening to the world," said Home Affairs Minister Karen Andrews as she announced the news, adding it was "yet another step forward for Australia". The government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison lifted restrictions on Australians travelling overseas last month, sparking a flood of travel bookings for the southern hemisphere summer.

But Morrison—who is hoping to be re-elected next year—had pointedly refused to relax travel rules for most non-Australians. That decision left an estimated

1.4 million skilled visa holders stuck in Australia, unable to return if they decided to leave. Business groups had lobbied hard for vaccinated visa holders to be allowed to return, as they struggle to fill jobs and gird for the beginning of a third year of restrictions. Among those most vocal in calling for rules to be further relaxed was the beleaguered university sector.

According to Universities Australia, an industry group, 130,000 international students remain outside the country. "They want nothing more than to re-join their classmates in Australia," said the group's chief executive Catriona Jackson, who described the decision as "great news."

There had been fears that many Asian students would opt to study in person in the United States or Europe rather than pay for online courses based in Australia. There is no word yet on when leisure travellers may be able to return to Australia, a blow to the equally hard-hit tourism sector, which has seen visitor numbers virtually evaporate since borders were closed in March 2020.

While some Australian states still require quarantine, vaccinated Australians, some visa holders and citizens of Japan, South Korea and Singapore will now be able to visit Australia with only a pre-departure negative COVID-19 test. — AFP



BARISAL, Bangladesh: This picture taken on October 27, 2021 shows Muslim mason Taher Ali Khan posing for a picture at the Barisal Mahashashan Hindu crematorium ground during an interview with AFP in Barisal. — AFP

## Muslim mason sculpts shrines for Bangladesh's Hindu dead

BARISAL: Bangladesh's minority Hindu community has endured waves of violence and persecution, but one Muslim artisan has devoted his talents to shepherding their dead along a peaceful journey to the next life. Taher Ali Khan has crafted thousands of shrines to departed loved ones around the tranquil grounds of Barisal Mahashashan, the country's largest Hindu crematorium.

The devout mason prays five times a day and adheres to all the precepts of the Islamic faith, but has often found himself fending off criticism from hardliners who question his calling.

"My prophet said to find bread by honest work. And he advised us to refrain from stealing, hurting others or committing any crimes," Khan, 60, tells AFP. "I work here constructing tombs," he added. "I don't see anything that would jeopardise my religion." Hindu account for about 10 percent of the majority-Muslim nation's 169 million people and are well represented in politics, business and the civil service.

But their numbers have dwindled from around a quarter of the population in 1947, when millions fled after the partition of newly-independent India into two separate nations along religious lines.

Another mass exodus coincided with the brutal nine-month Bangladesh war of independence in 1971, during which occupying Pakistani military commanders sanctioned attacks that saw tens of thousands of Hindu civilians murdered.

Occasional flashes of deadly religious conflict continue to this day, with at least six people killed last month in nationwide unrest that also saw attacks on temples. News of the recent violence upset Khan, who spent the following days calling on Hindu friends to ask about their safety.

"I consider Hindus to be my brothers and sisters," he says. "They love me because of my work. I pour my heart out into constructing tombs because everyone wants to build something beautiful for their dead."

'All my love and care'

Khan spends most of his time at the crematorium, labouring away at ornate samadhi shrines that criss-cross the grounds around the funeral pyre.

The more humble monuments are small and unassuming concrete slabs, similar in style to Western tombstones, with ashes from the dead buried underneath. The largest are elaborate, multi-tiered edifices with colourful spires that tower over the small man-made pond that greets visitors at the graveyard's entrance, which can sell for up to 250,000 taka (\$3,000). "If I build a beautiful Samadhi for the dead, it gives me enormous satisfaction," he says.

"I feel like I have done something to help them feel good and to mourn their dead well." Khan learned his trade 35 years ago and by his estimation has built more than 10,000 samadhis in the time since — most of those around Barisal crematorium are his handiwork. "Look at this beautiful one," he says, gesturing at one of the shrines during a tour of the graveyard.

"The family wanted something beautiful for their young boy, who died suddenly. I did it with all my love and care." His work is in high demand from Hindus living in Barisal and from far-flung farming communities around the southern river port. "It doesn't matter whether he's a Muslim, he does a solid job," said Gouranga Das, who came to the grounds to cremate his mother and again seek Khan's services. "He made my grandfather's tomb and it was very nice."

Every year during the Bhoot Chaturdashi festival, when Hindu worshippers honour their dead by adorning samadhis with candles, he receives dozens of invitations to commemorate loved ones.

After spending more than half his life working at Barisal Mahashashan, its owners also consider him family, even though he still nominally works as a free-lancer. "People come to him for constructing tombstones for their relatives as he is the best," said Tamal Malakar, the crematorium's general secretary.

"We love him and his work." — AFP