

International

US warship sails through Taiwan Strait days after China war games

First such US operation through the waterway since January

TAIPEI: A US warship sailed through the waters separating Taiwan and mainland China, the US Navy said, days after Beijing staged war games around the self-ruled island. Led by the United States, multiple Western navies regularly conduct "freedom of navigation operations" to assert the international status of regional waterways such as the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

The USS Milius guided-missile destroyer "conducted a routine Taiwan Strait transit April 16 (local time) through waters where high-seas freedoms of navigation and overflight apply in accordance with international law", the US Navy said in a statement. "The ship transited through a corridor in the Strait that is beyond the territorial sea of any coastal State."

This was the first such US operation through the waterway since January. The US 7th Fleet shared images Monday on Twitter of crew looking out into the strait, one of the most crucial waterways in the world for international shipping.

China said on Monday it had tracked a US warship through the Taiwan Strait, adding that the United States had "hyped up" the transit. Colonel Shi Yi, a Chinese military spokesman, said troops in the area "remain on a high level of alert at all times and will resolutely defend national sovereignty and security as well as regional peace and stability".

China claims Taiwan as its territory and has vowed to bring the island under its control one day. It also claims the entire Taiwan Strait as its territorial wa-

ters. Taiwan's defense ministry said on Monday that during the vessel's transit, its military had "closely monitored the dynamics in our surrounding sea and airspace, and the situation was normal."

China launched three days of military exercises around Taiwan on April 8, simulating targeted strikes and a blockade of the island. The drills were in response to Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen's recent visit to the United States, where she met with Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy. Beijing bristles at any official contact between Taipei and foreign governments.

On the final day of last week's drills, Taiwan's defense ministry said 54 Chinese planes crossed into Taiwan's southwestern and southeastern air defense identification zone (ADIZ) -- the highest recorded in a single day since October 2021. That same day, the USS Milius sailed through waters claimed by Beijing in the South China Sea. That deployment triggered condemnation from China, which said the vessel had "illegally intruded" into its territorial waters.

Since the war games ended, Chinese warships and aircraft have continued to circle Taiwan. On Monday, Taipei's defense ministry said it had detected four warships and 18 aircraft, four of which had crossed its southwestern ADIZ.

The guided-missile destroyer USS Chung-Hoon sailed through the Taiwan Strait on January 5, months after McCarthy's predecessor Nancy Pelosi visited the island. Pelosi's trip sparked China's largest-ever war games around Taiwan. — AFP



Photo shows US Navy the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Milius (DDG 69) conducting routine operations in the South China Sea. The US Navy said its guided-missile destroyer the USS Milius had sailed through the Taiwan Strait in a "freedom of navigation" operation carried out days after China staged massive war games. — AFP

News in Brief

Killer cop pleads not guilty

NAIROBI: A Kenyan police officer accused of murdering two teenagers in 2017 pleaded not guilty to the charges on Monday, in a case that raised questions about extrajudicial killings after video footage of the shootings went viral. Dubbed the "killer cop" by media outlets, Ahmed Rashid was filmed shooting the two young men as they lay on the ground on a busy street in the capital Nairobi on March 31, 2017. The Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA) watchdog recommended murder charges against him last November, saying that its investigation into the deaths "established that the fatalities were occasioned by police action." But Rashid contested the charges, telling the Nairobi high court that he was a law-abiding police officer who was carrying out his duty. He was arrested and immediately released on bail of 200,000 Kenyan shillings (\$1,500) on Monday, following an application by his lawyers. Kenyan police are often accused by rights groups of using excessive force and carrying out unlawful killings, especially in poor neighborhoods. Last October, President William Ruto disbanded a feared 20-year-old police unit accused of extrajudicial killings and vowed an overhaul of the security sector. — AFP

Putin praises Pacific drills

MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday praised the "very high level" of military drills in the Pacific as Moscow seeks closer ties with China amid a stand-off with the West. The surprise drills announced last week come as Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu is in Russia on a visit which will last until Wednesday. Putin received Chinese leader Xi Jinping last month in Moscow for a summit showing the nations' united front against the West. During a meeting with Putin and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu on Sunday, Li hailed ties with Moscow, saying they "surpass the military-political alliances of the Cold War era". The exercises in the Pacific involved over 25,000 Russian military personnel, 167 warships and support vessels, including 12 submarines as well as 89 aircraft and helicopters, Shoigu said. "The first stage of this surprise inspection did indeed take place at a very high level," Putin said during a televised meeting with Shoigu. "Today we have clear priorities for the use of the armed forces and, above all, this concerns the Ukrainian direction and everything related to protecting our people in the Donbas" in eastern Ukraine, Putin said. — AFP

Prague Castle scraps checks

PRAGUE: Czech President Petr Pavel said Monday that Prague Castle, the presidential seat, would scrap security checks introduced in 2016 following a wave of terror attacks in western Europe. "We will begin to remove most metal detector arches and cancel security checks at noon (1000 GMT) today," Pavel told reporters. The measure will eliminate long queues forming at entrances to Prague Castle, which is a part of the UNESCO-listed historic centre of the Czech capital and a popular tourist attraction. "People coming to visit Prague Castle or to work there are not happy if they have to spend an hour in a queue," Pavel added. Pavel, who won a five-year presidential term in a direct vote in January, said he also wanted to open the castle for different social and cultural events. Czech police head Martin Vondrasek said the checks had been introduced in the wake of terror attacks in Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016. "At that time, Prague Castle was identified as a major potential soft target" for terrorists, he added. — AFP

Myanmar junta free 3,000 prisoners in New Year amnesty

YANGON: Myanmar's junta on Monday began releasing more than 3,000 prisoners to mark the Buddhist New Year, without specifying whether those jailed in its bloody crackdown on dissent would be freed. The military has arrested thousands since its coup more than two years ago, which plunged the country into turmoil and sparked widespread clashes with anti-coup fighters.

Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing "pardoned 3,015 prisoners... to mark Myanmar New Year, for the peaceful mind of the people and on humanitarian grounds", the junta's information team said in a statement. Those who re-offend would have to serve the remainder of their sentence with an additional penalty, the statement said.

It did not say whether anti-junta protesters or journalists jailed covering the coup and its aftermath would be among those freed. A further 98 foreigners serving sentences in Myanmar would also be pardoned and freed, according to a separate junta statement that did not provide details.

Around 100 people gathered outside Insein prison in commercial hub Yangon after the announcement, hoping their friends and loved ones would be included in the amnesty. Win Win Htay said her younger brother had been jailed for four months after police stopped him at a checkpoint and found a small knife



YANGON: Relatives wait for the release of prisoners outside the Insein prison in Yangon. — AFP

on his keychain. "I hope he will be released today," she told AFP as she waited outside the prison. Two yellow buses later pulled out from the prison compound, with some in the waiting crowd waving and calling to those inside. Shortly after its coup, the junta released around 23,000 prisoners, with some rights groups at the time fearing the move was to free up space for opponents of the military as well as to cause chaos in communities.

The country typically grants an amnesty to thousands of prisoners to mark its traditional Buddhist New Year holiday — which in previous years was a joyous affair. But this year, streets in many major cities

were silent in boycott after a military air strike on a village in a resistance hotspot that media and locals said killed more than 170 people.

More than 21,000 people have been arrested since the military ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's government in February 2021, according to a local monitoring group. Suu Kyi has been detained since the early hours of the coup. In December, the junta wrapped up a series of closed-court trials of the 77-year-old Nobel Peace laureate, jailing her for a total of 33 years in a process rights groups have condemned as a sham. At least 170 journalists have been arrested since the putsch, according to the United Nations. — AFP

Heat kills 11 at India awards event

NEW DELHI: Eleven people died of heatstroke in India after an estimated one million spectators waited for hours in the sun at a government-sponsored awards ceremony, officials said on Monday. Around 20 people were hospitalized and 300 felt ill at the event near the western city of Mumbai on Sunday, when temperatures hit close to 38 degrees Celsius (100 Fahrenheit) with high levels of humidity, local media reported.

Senior government officials attended the ceremony, including Interior Minister Amit Shah, who praised the crowd for waiting so long in the sun. The office of Maharashtra state Chief

Minister Eknath Shinde described it as a "sad and disturbing incident" and promised compensation for the victims' relatives.

India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party said around a million people attended the event, the Indian Express newspaper reported. The opposition Congress party accused the government of negligence and said it should face criminal charges.

Heatwaves have killed more than 6,500 people in India since 2010, and last year saw record temperatures in several cities across the country. The hot spells are becoming harsher and more frequent across South Asia, spurred by climate change, according to scientists.

Authorities in the eastern state of West Bengal announced a week-long shutdown of all schools, colleges and universities from Monday due to the heat, local media reported. Last year,



MUMBAI: In this photograph taken on April 16, 2023, people gather to attend an award ceremony on the outskirts of Mumbai. Heatstroke killed 11 people in India after an estimated million spectators waited for hours in the sun. — AFP

India suffered coal shortages, the main source of electricity in the nation of 1.4 billion people, as electricity demand peaked in the heat.

Many parts of India rely on trains

to supply water during the summer. Scientists also believe the annual monsoon rainy season is becoming more erratic and powerful, causing greater flooding. — AFP

Top honor for Merkel

BERLIN: Former chancellor Angela Merkel will receive Germany's highest honor on Monday despite facing continued criticism of her legacy since leaving office, especially over her policy towards Moscow. Merkel, who led Europe's biggest economy from 2005 to 2021, is due to receive the special class Grand Cross from President Frank-Walter Steinmeier on Monday evening.

The award has been handed out only twice before, to former chancellors Konrad Adenauer and Helmut Kohl. Though hugely popular through most of her time in power, Merkel, 68, has seen her star fade since she retired in December 2021.

The long-time leader has in particular faced criticism of her policy towards Russian President Vladimir Putin and for leaving Germany dependent on Russian energy -- a weakness laid bare by the war in Ukraine.

"At the end of her time in office, our country was not in good shape," Bijan Djir-Sarai of the pro-business FDP party told the RND broadcaster. Merkel has also been criticized for her decisions in 2011 to exit nuclear power and in 2015 to welcome hundreds

of thousands of refugees from Syria and Iraq.

The former chancellor had "great merits, particularly at an international level", Carsten Linnemann, vice-president of Merkel's own conservative CDU party, told the NTV news channel. But she "also made mistakes, some of them glaring", he said.

The nuclear exit, agreed after the Fukushima disaster, was "a mistake" because it was decided "without establishing how we were going to supply ourselves with energy in a reasonably self-sufficient way", Linnemann said. Some "glaring mistakes" had also been made with regard to the decision to leave Germany's borders open in 2015, he said.

But Merkel, who has been writing her memoirs since she retired, has also continued to win praise, even from her Social Democrat (SPD) and Greens rivals. "I particularly appreciated her diplomatic skill and empathetic wisdom, thanks to which she always succeeded in forging viable coalitions and compromises on the national and international stage," SPD co-leader Saskia Esken told RND.

Greens leader Omid Nouripour said Merkel had "shaped our country with her chancellorship like few others". "You do not have to agree with everything she did to recognize her great merits," he said. Some commentators have questioned the logic of Merkel receiving the award from Steinmeier, who was foreign minister in her government. — AFP

Bangladeshis pray for rain as temperatures soar

DHAKA: Hundreds of Bangladeshi Muslims gathered on an open field in Dhaka on Monday to pray for rain after the metropolis of 20 million people recorded its hottest day in almost 60 years. Police said more than 500 worshippers congregated on the Aftabnagar playing ground, where popular TV cleric Shaikh Ahmadullah led the prayers.

"They held the prayers for rains. They also held prayers for easing the temperature and protection from the heatwave," local police chief Abul Kalam Azad told AFP. The poor, low-lying South Asian nation of 170 million people is at the forefront of climate change with frequent deadly floods and ever-more-erratic rains.

The rains that usually fall in April and May have failed to materialize this year and the country has been gripped by unusually hot weather since April 4, Afroza Sultana from the Meteorology Department told AFP. On Sunday temperatures in Dhaka soared to 40.6 degrees Celsius (105.1 Fahrenheit), the highest since April 30, 1965, when the temperature hit 42 degrees Celsius, she said. Sultana said temperatures would gradually decline in the coming days and rains were expected later in April, just before the country celebrates its largest festival, Eid Al-Fitr. — AFP