

International

Muted response as Thailand hunger strikers hit 50 days

Another man jailed for rubber duck calendar royal insult

BANGKOK: Two young protesters held under Thailand's strict royal insult law entered their 50th day of hunger striking on Wednesday, but in the run-up to a general election and with the government cracking down on dissent, the response to their marathon action has been muted. Tantawan Tuatulanon and Orawan Phupong have been in and out of court and hospital since beginning their hunger strike on January 18 to urge political parties to support the abolition of the kingdom's tough lese majeste laws.

But with mainstream politicians focused on the upcoming polls and many activists fearful of being charged with lese majeste themselves if they voice support, even after seven weeks of hunger the pair's protest is not making waves. "There were many people at the beginning, but as the protest continues fewer people come," said Krisadang Nootjaras, from Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (TLHR), a legal aid group that handles many royal insult cases.

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-Cha, a conservative former army chief who took power in a 2014 coup, has pleaded with the women's families to "monitor" their behaviour.

Opposition parties have stopped short of backing Tantawan and Orawan's calls for reform, reluctant to

get entangled in the highly sensitive question of the monarchy so close to an election.

And there has been little action on Bangkok's streets, which were brought to a standstill by mass youth-led protests in 2020 and 2021 that included demands for changes to the royal insult law.

Tantawan, 21, and Orawan, 23, were freed from custody last month as their condition worsened, and they are now conscious in hospital and receiving electrolytes, Krisadang said.

They were charged in 2022 with lese majeste over two separate protests in Bangkok. Since the protest movement erupted in July 2020, TLHR says more than 200 people have been charged under article 112 of the penal code, which orders up to 15 years in jail for anyone who "defames, insults or threatens" the king or his immediate family.

'Repressive environment'

Rights groups say the law is abused to silence political dissent, and the sentences handed out can be severe—one woman got 43 years in prison in 2021. At least 17 minors are facing prosecution, and on Tuesday a man was jailed for two years for selling a satirical calendar featuring yellow rubber ducks that a court ruled was insulting to the king.

"Under this repressive environment people are fearing to come out, and speak out, and demand democracy and any other causes that they want," Amnesty International researcher Chanatip Tatiyakaroonwong told AFP.

"I think that partly contributes to the overall silence that we are seeing right now," Chanatip said the election, expected sometime in May, added to peoples' fear of a tougher government crackdown. "Many people may have this assessment and decide to refrain from speaking out further," he said.

Napisa Waitoolkiat, political analyst at Naresuan University, said media attention on the election meant there was little room for other reporting.

In addition to that, she continued, the increasing use of the lese majeste law was "creating fear". "It doesn't mean that the pro-democracy movement has disappeared, or that Thai people do not pay attention. But it is less now," she said. With journalists outnumbering supporters outside Orawan and Tantawan's hospital, their strike goes on-and their condition worsens. Lawyer Krisadang said the women were determined to fight for their cause, even if public interest was low. "These kids still stick with their ideology. If they prove they are right, (the public) will support them," he said. — AFP



BANGKOK: File photo shows Thai political activist Tantawan "Tawan" Tuatulanon being transported on a stretcher to continue a hunger strike outside Thailand's Supreme Court after being released from Thammasat Hospital in Bangkok. — AFP

Australia PM says to meet Biden in US

SYDNEY: Australia's prime minister said Wednesday he will soon meet President Joe Biden in the United States, where they are expected to unveil a nuclear submarine deal aimed at countering China's growing assertiveness in the Pacific.

After 18 months of negotiations, it's anticipated that Australia will reveal plans to obtain eight nuclear-powered submarines, in what Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has called "the single biggest leap" in defence capability in the country's history.

The deal is part of the fledgling regional security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States known as AUKUS. "I'll be meeting with President Biden in the United States," Albanese told reporters in Perth on Wednesday. "We'll have further announcements about details soon about the arrangements that will be taking place." Australia does not have the expertise to build its own nuclear subs—which have an extended range and powerful strike capabilities—and must buy them from either the United States or Britain.

Since September 2021, detailed behind-the-scenes talks have been taking place between the AUKUS partners about how to equip Australia's military with sensitive nuclear-propulsion technology. The deal has worried some of Australia's largest regional allies, with both Indonesia and Malaysia questioning whether it could spark a nuclear arms race in the Indo-Pacific.

While the subs will be powered by a nuclear reactor, Australia has ruled out equipping them with nuclear weapons. It is the first time US-derived nuclear submarine technologies will be exported since the 1960s, when the United States helped Britain design its own undersea fleet. The submarine contract is worth tens of billions of US dollars, but experts say its significance goes beyond jobs created and investments pledged.

Fearsome deterrent

Nuclear-powered submarines are difficult to detect, can travel large distances for prolonged periods and can be armed with sophisticated cruise missiles. That, experts say, makes them a fearsome deterrent—allowing Australia to launch strikes or counterstrikes deep into enemy territory with little warning.

Beijing has voiced deep opposition to the project, which it sees as "dangerous" and designed to corner China. Major questions still linger, including whether Australia will look to buy US or British submarines, where they will be built and when they will be in the water.

"The AUKUS partnership seeks to provide a conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarine capability to Australia at the earliest possible date," a Pentagon spokesperson told AFP ahead of Albanese's announcement.

"Bolstering our deterrence means boosting all of our industrial bases, growing our collective capabilities, and sharing technology as never before." The AUKUS pact also foresees collaboration between the three allies on hypersonic missiles, artificial intelligence and cyber warfare.

The subs deal has been contentious in the US, which is struggling to grow its own fleet of nuclear submarines. The chair of the influential US Senate armed services committee, Democrat Jack Reed, warned Biden in December that selling subs to Australia could undermine American naval prowess.

In a leaked letter sent to Biden, Reed also wrote that the AUKUS agreement risked "stressing the US submarine industrial base to the breaking point". Australia had originally planned to buy diesel-powered submarines in a lucrative deal inked with France, but abruptly scrapped that agreement in favour of AUKUS. — AFP

Thousands of women rally in Pakistan despite legal hurdles

LAHORE: Thousands of women took part in rallies across Pakistan on Wednesday despite efforts by authorities in several cities to block the divisive marches. Known as the Aurat (women) March, the rallies have courted controversy because of banners and placards waved by participants that raise subjects such as divorce, sexual harassment and menstruation. Each year some of the most provocative banners ignite weeks of outrage and a slew of violent threats. "The



ISLAMABAD: Activists of Aurat (women) March hold placards as they chant slogans during a demonstration rally to mark the International Women's Day in Islamabad on March 8, 2023. — AFP

Dozens sick in Philippines hit by oil spill

MANILA: Dozens of people in the Philippines have fallen ill after oil from a sunken tanker washed up on their shores, officials said Wednesday, as authorities struggled to reach the leaking vessel. The Princess Empress was carrying 800,000 litres (210,000 gallons) of industrial fuel oil when it sank more than a week ago off the central island of Mindoro, south of the capital Manila.

Diesel fuel and thick oil from the vessel have contaminated the waters and beaches of nine municipalities along the coast of Oriental Mindoro province, Governor Humerlito Dolor told reporters. Oil has been spotted as far south as Semirara island—which is part of Antique province—more than 130 kilometres (80 miles) from where the tanker went down.

That has sparked concerns for the region's rich marine life and economy. Provincial health officer Cielo Ante said at least 43 people living in affected villages had reported suffering vomiting, headaches and nausea since the oil reached their shores. "They live in areas where the oil spill occurred," said Ante. No one was hospitalised and authorities had not confirmed if the symptoms were the direct result of the spill, she added. Dolor said clean-up efforts were underway to prevent a spike in sickness.

"We cannot afford to add more numbers. Every day that passes is calamitous," he told a briefing. Residents and coast guard personnel wearing protective clothing and rubber gloves have been removing oil-coated seaweed and other debris from affected beaches. An oil spill boom was deployed on Wednesday after rough seas hampered earlier efforts to contain the slick, Philippine Coast Guard spokesman Armando Balilo

UK opens military base in Norway

LONDON: The UK on Wednesday announced the opening of a military base in the far north of Norway to strengthen NATO's capabilities in the Arctic amid concerns following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The newly-established Norwegian site, called Camp Viking, will serve as a hub for Royal Marines Commandos, Britain's Royal Navy said in a press release.

whole point of the Aurat March is to demand the security and safety that women are not afforded in this country and society," said Rabail Akhtar, a school-teacher who joined a crowd of around 2,000 in Lahore to mark International Women's Day.

"We are not going to sit silently anymore. It's our day, it's our time." City authorities had at the weekend refused to provide security, despite allowing a "modesty" counter-march to go ahead, before a court ordered them to back down. "It's ridiculous how we have to go through the same drama every year... Why are they so afraid of women demanding their rights?" asked Soheila Afzal, a graphic designer. In Karachi, judges dismissed a legal challenge by an individual to ban a related rally scheduled for the weekend so that working women could attend.

Counter marches

In the capital Islamabad, organisers refused to comply with orders to confine the gathering to a city park where a woman was gang raped in February. Hundreds of women gathered instead outside the city's press club, where police eventually removed a barricade and allowed the march to begin. "Women used to be quiet, but now we have women on roads talking about their rights and justice and I think that is the change they were looking for," said 24-year-old NGO worker Aisha Masood. The Aurat March is seen by critics as supporting elitist and Western cultural values in the Muslim country, with organisers accused of disrespecting religious and cultural sensitivities.

Counter marches are also held in most cities, where women from right-wing religious groups call for modesty and "family values" to be upheld. "I will not defend men because we live in a patriarchal and male-dominated society. But we have to ensure an end to violence while confining ourselves within the parameters of Islamic Shariah," said 45-year-old Asia Yaqoob, a housewife veiled in a hijab at a rally of more than 1,000 women in the capital.

"The beauty of a woman lies in covering her body in a way that our religion teaches." In 2020, groups of hardline Islamist men turned up in vans and hurled stones at women participating in the Aurat March in Islamabad.

Much of Pakistani society operates under a strict code of "honour", systemising the oppression of women in matters such as the right to choose who to marry, reproductive rights and even the right to an education. Hundreds of women are killed by men in Pakistan every year for allegedly breaching this code. — AFP

China confirms 53 'missing or dead' from mine collapse

BEIJING: The collapse of a coal mine in northern China last month left a total of 53 people "missing or dead", a top official has said, as search and rescue work appeared to come to an end. Dozens of people and vehicles were buried when a 180-metre-high (590-foot) slope gave way at an open-pit mine in the Inner Mongolia region's Alxa Left Banner on February 22.

Rescue workers initially recovered six people alive, while another six were found dead, as Beijing's ministry of emergency management urged "all-out efforts" to save 47 workers left unaccounted for. But the head of the ministry confirmed on Tuesday that no more people had been found two weeks after the incident, adding that the focus was now on ensuring such a disaster would not happen again.

The collapse "left 53 people missing or dead, which has made us extremely sad", Wang Xiangxi said on the sidelines of annual political meetings in Beijing, according to the state-run China Youth Daily newspaper.

"The lessons from this are extremely profound. In the next stage, we will make the prevention of major accidents a top priority of our work," he said. Authorities would look to ramp up safety measures, ferret out hidden dangers and promote automation in high-risk industries, the newspaper quoted Wang as saying. An arid, sparsely populated area, Alxa Left Banner's economy relies largely on mining and other extractive industries. Footage from state broadcaster CCTV at the time of the collapse showed rescue workers and excavators dwarfed by a mountain of rust-coloured rubble. — AFP



POLA: Coast guard personnel and volunteers seen collecting debris covered with oil during a clean-up along the coast in Pola, Oriental Mindoro Province, days after an oil spill from a sunken tanker. — AFP

It described the troops as "the tip of the Arctic spear" and "the unit the UK turns to when it needs troops able to fight in cold weather extremes". "A new Arctic operations base will support Britain's commandos for the next 10 years as the UK underscores its commitment to security in the High North," the navy added.

Norway, which borders Russia, refuses to host permanent bases for foreign soldiers, so Camp Viking is due to remain open for just a decade. The purpose-built base, located around 40 miles (65 kilometres) south of Tromsø, will be able to accommodate all personnel from the elite commando-led Royal Marines force which reacts to emerging crises in Europe.

"The camp's location is ideal for deterring threats in the region and situated so the UK can respond rapidly if needed to protect NATO's northern flank and its close ally, Norway," the navy statement said. Around 1,000 commandos have deployed to the base this winter.

Norway, which shares a 60-mile (98-kilometre) border with Russia, has provided Ukraine with a wide range of military equipment, including artillery and ammunition. The Ukraine conflict prompted its neighbours Finland and Sweden to apply for NATO membership in May 2022, turning the page on policies of military non-alignment in force for decades. — AFP