

International

Taiwan recalls ambassador to Honduras over FM's China visit

China 'ready' to establish ties with Honduras

TAIPEI: Taiwan recalled on Thursday its ambassador to Honduras over a visit by Tegucigalpa's foreign minister to China, Taipei's government said in a statement. "Honduras ignored more than 80 years of friendship between (Taiwan and Honduras) when they sent their foreign minister to China, which has seriously damaged the feelings of our government and people," said a foreign ministry statement.

"We have decided to immediately recall our ambassador in Honduras to express our strong dissatisfaction." The announcement came as Honduran Foreign Minister Eduardo Enrique Reina was heading to China to hold talks on the establishment of diplomatic relations with Beijing, government officials said.

China considers self-ruled democratic Taiwan as a part of its territory, to be retaken one day—by force, if necessary. Last week, Honduran President Xiomara Castro ordered Reina to establish diplomatic relations with China, a move that would sever its ties with Taiwan.

Under Beijing's "One China" principle, no country may maintain official diplomatic relations with both China and Taiwan. Taipei maintains a similar policy, having cut ties in the past with countries that switched recognition to Beijing.

If Honduras does formally switch recognition, it would leave Taiwan with just 13 countries with which it has formal diplomatic ties, having lost several Latin American allies in recent years. Reina was being ac-

companied to China by lawmaker Xiomara Zelaya, the daughter of President Castro, three government and diplomatic officials told AFP on condition of anonymity. The Honduran delegation will meet Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang, Minister of the Presidency Rodolfo Pastor told local daily El Heraldo. Beijing has not confirmed the visit, but on Thursday foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said China was "ready" to establish ties with Honduras.

"China welcomes the positive remarks made by the Honduran government on developing relations with China and stands ready to establish and develop bilateral relations with Honduras on the basis of equality and mutual respect," said Wang.

Last week, Reina said economic necessity and Taiwan's refusal to increase financial aid to Honduras were behind the decision to establish ties with China. Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Latin America, with almost 74 percent of its almost 10 million population living in poverty. Reina put the country's internal and external debt at \$20 billion, of which \$600 million is owed to Taiwan.

The diplomatic switch—which Castro had promised to make while on the campaign trail—came weeks after her government announced it was negotiating with China to build a hydroelectric dam. Addressing questions from lawmakers about reports that Honduras had demanded more aid from Taipei, Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu said Thursday



TAIPEI: File photo shows a woman walking past a Honduras flag (C) at Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Taipei. Taiwan recalled on March 23, 2023 its ambassador to Honduras over a visit by Tegucigalpa's foreign minister to China, Taipei's government said in a statement. — AFP

that his government was not prepared to accept an "unreasonable request." "I will be frank, we are in a rather difficult situation. We are still trying our best, and we will do our best to the last minute," he said.

"But we will not accept any unreasonable request, from Honduras or any other country, especially if they are opaque." In a separate statement on the same issue, Taiwan's foreign ministry said the island "will not engage with China in dollar diplomacy".

"(The foreign ministry) would like to once again appeal and remind the Honduran government not

to fall into China's debt trap." Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen will depart on March 29 on a 10-day trip to shore up ties with two of its remaining allies—Belize and Guatemala—and will also stop in the United States while in transit.

On March 7, US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy confirmed that he would meet Tsai in his home state of California, with the US State Department asserting the expected travel was "transit" rather than a "visit". Beijing has expressed opposition to that meeting. — AFP

Australian PM calls on voters to back Aboriginal 'voice'

SYDNEY: Australia's prime minister on Thursday made a tearful appeal to voters, asking them to support the creation of an Aboriginal "voice" in lawmaking as he announced the wording of the referendum question. Anthony Albanese said that Australians had a chance to make up for centuries of injustice, to formally recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island groups, and give them a voice in decision-making at a vote later this year. This is "about how our nation sees ourselves. Whether we have the confidence to embrace our history", said Albanese, painting the vote as a chance for Australians to make their country fairer. "What we have done up to now hasn't worked," he said, hailing the vote as a "historic democratic opportunity, a chance to show the very best of our national character, our fundamental optimism and a deep sense of fairness, our instinctive respect and kindness for each other."

The referendum aims to create an Indigenous advisory body that would have a constitutionally en-

shrined obligation to advise parliament on new laws and regulations. Sometime later this year, Australians will be asked to vote on a proposal to "alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice". Albanese said he felt a "weight of responsibility" about a proposal that is far from certain to pass. Polls show that about 60 percent of Australians back the constitutional change, but support has been declining and there are lingering questions about how the "voice" would work.

The body will not have a veto on legislation. It is not yet clear how or if the body would be democratically elected. Albanese sought to allay concerns about the project, stressing it was a "modest" request that was as much about how Australia sees itself as nuts-and-bolts lawmaking. For decades, Australia's white majority has struggled to reckon with its frequently brutal past. For more than a century, Indigenous Australians were not considered full citizens and although those rights are now enshrined in law, there is still deep inequality. Indigenous Australians are much more likely to be poor, to have limited access to education or healthcare and to be incarcerated than their white compatriots. "A Voice to Parliament, enshrined in our Constitution, will mean that our people are listened to and heard on the issues that affect us," said Aboriginal Senator Patrick Dodson. — AFP

Rahul Gandhi found guilty of defamation

AHMEDABAD: An Indian court Thursday found opposition leader Rahul Gandhi guilty of defamation for a 2019 campaign trail remark implying that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was a criminal. Modi's government has been widely accused of using the law to target and silence critics, and the case in the premier's home state of Gujarat is one of several lodged against his chief opponent in recent years. Gandhi, the leading face of the opposition Congress party, was sentenced to two years imprisonment but immediately granted bail after his lawyers announced their intention to appeal. The case stemmed from a remark made during the 2019 election campaign in which the 52-year-old had asked why "all thieves have Modi as (their) common surname". His comments were seen as a slur against the prime minister, who went on to win the election in a landslide. Members of the government also said the remark was a smear against all those sharing the Modi surname, which is associated with the lower rungs of India's traditional caste hierarchy.

"If you are going to insult the entire Modi surname, this is completely defamatory," Ravi Shankar Prasad, a lawmaker for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), told reporters. "There was a proper hearing. He got an opportunity to present his side of things," he added. "The decision has been taken according to the due judicial process." Gandhi's lawyer B. M. Mangukhiya said his client had not meant to insult anyone. "When the magistrate asked Gandhi what he had to say in his defence, the Congress leader said that he was fighting to expose corruption in the country," Mangukhiya told reporters outside the court. "His comments were not meant to hurt or insult any community." Gandhi is the son, grandson and great-grandson of a dynasty of former Indian prime ministers, beginning with independence leader Jawaharlal Nehru.

But the scion of India's most famous political dynasty has struggled to challenge the electoral juggernaut of Modi and its nationalist appeals to the country's Hindu majority. Gandhi, who was present in court in Surat for the verdict, was greeted by supporters on his arrival. He faces at least two other defamation cases elsewhere in the country. Gandhi is also on bail in another money laundering case that has been snaking its way through India's glacial legal system for more than a decade. He denies any financial impropriety. — AFP

can be exploited by autocratic states such as Russia to exercise foreign influence, according to multiple researchers. It can also be used to subdue the opposition. "When autocratic leaders are in power, gendered disinformation is often used by state-aligned actors to undermine women opposition leaders, as well as women's rights," Di Mecco's report warned.

'Attacks on dignity'

Women around the globe battle falsehoods that reinforce stereotypes that they are unintelligent or inefficient. In 2021, Egyptian sports shooter Al-Zahraa Shaaban faced false social media posts that she had been excluded from the Tokyo Olympics because she had shot the referee.

That sparked a wave of comments that ridiculed women and questioned their ability to pursue such sporting activities. Similar questions were raised about their ability to take on military jobs following last year's crash of an F-35 fighter jet on the deck of a US aircraft carrier in the South China Sea. False social media posts held the world's first woman to fly an F-35 responsible for the crash. The pilot, in fact, was a man. Such humiliating falsehoods, researchers say, can have a silencing effect on women, who are drawn to disengage, censor themselves and even avoid male-dominated professions, including politics. That was a concern raised in a letter by dozens of US and international lawmakers in 2020 to Facebook, which along with other platforms has been blamed for the algorithmic amplification of false and hateful content targeting women. In a statement to US media at the time, Facebook acknowledged that online abuse of women was a "serious problem" and pledged to work with policymakers on their concerns. — AFP



NADI: Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is presented a whale tooth, known as tabua, from a military official during a traditional welcoming ceremony at the Black Rock Army Camp in Fiji's coastal city Nadi. — AFP

Across globe, women battle 'gendered disinformation'

WASHINGTON: Fake photos showing Ukraine's first lady sunbathing topless, incorrect video subtitles defaming Pakistani feminists for "blasphemy", slow-motion clips falsely depicting "drunk" female politicians—a barrage of disinformation targets women in the public eye. Researchers say "gendered disinformation"—when sexism and misogyny intersect with online falsehoods—has relentlessly targeted women around the world, tarnishing their reputations, undermining their credibility and, in many cases, upending their careers.

AFP's global fact-checkers have debunked falsehoods targeting politically active women, or those linked to prominent politicians, exposing online campaigns that feature fake information or manipulated images that are often sexually charged. Last year, a fake image of Ukraine's First Lady Olena Zelenska lying topless on a beach in the Zionist entity was shared widely on Facebook, triggering criticism that she was having fun while her war-torn country was suffering.

A reverse image search by AFP showed the woman in the photo was, in fact, a Russian television presenter. Former American first lady Michelle Obama and current French first lady Brigitte Macron have also been targeted in false online posts that claimed they were born as men. The disinformation sparked an av-

alanche of mockery and transphobic remarks.

New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern, who announced her resignation as prime minister in January, is another prominent figure that faced a torrent of disinformation about her sex. "Women—especially those in positions of power and visibility—are unduly targeted by online disinformation," Maria Giovanna Sessa, a senior researcher at the nonprofit EU DisinfoLab, wrote in a report last year.

'Chilling effect'

In another tactic that raised alarm in 2020, a slowed-down version of a video of Nancy Pelosi, the then US House Speaker, went viral. The effect made her speech slurred and gave the false impression that she was drunk. "Building on sexist stereotypes and disseminated with malign intent, gendered disinformation campaigns have a chilling effect on the women they target," Lucina Di Mecco, a gender equality expert wrote in a study published last month.

The disinformation often leads to "political violence, hate and the deterring of young women from considering a political career," said the study titled "monetizing misogyny." In disinformation tactics typically deployed by political opponents, female politicians are sometimes framed as inherently undependable, too emotional or promiscuous to hold office. When Germany's current foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, was running for chancellor in 2021, she was the subject of frequent disinformation campaigns which raised questions about whether she was fit for the job. One of them featured images of a nude model purporting to be her, alongside suggestions that she had engaged in sex work. Gendered disinformation represents a national security threat as it

News in Brief

Man charged for murders

LONDON: UK police on Thursday charged a 28-year-old man with the attempted murders of two elderly men who were set on fire after they left mosques, in separate attacks. West Midlands Police said Mohammed Abbrk, 28, from Edgbaston in Birmingham, central England, would appear at the city's magistrates court. He was arrested on Tuesday following an investigation involving counter-terrorism police and remains in custody. Abbrk allegedly sprayed a substance on the two men outside or near mosques they had attended and then set them alight, in incidents in west London on February 27 and Birmingham on Monday. — AFP

Toilet spycams

BANGKOK: A former IT manager at the Australian embassy in Thailand was sentenced on Thursday to two years in jail for installing spy cameras in women's bathrooms at the mission. Nayot Thamsongsana, 39, pleaded guilty to two counts of committing an indecent act, under the kingdom's sexual and public nuisance laws. The cameras were discovered after a memory card was found on the bathroom floor in 2021, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported. It is not clear how long they had been installed for. "The court found him guilty of two counts and sentenced him to two years on each, but with his confession, the penalty was reduced by half," a prosecutor told AFP. — AFP

Five migrants drown

TUNIS: Five migrants from sub-Saharan Africa drowned and another 28 were missing Wednesday after their boat capsized off Tunisia, a rights group said. "Five migrants' bodies were recovered and five other migrants were rescued, but 28 are still missing," said Romdhane Ben Amor of the Tunisian Forum for social and economic rights (FTDES). He said it had sunk "because it was overloaded" with 38 people, mostly from the Ivory Coast. The boat had set off from the coastal region of Sfax in the direction of the Italian island of Lampedusa, a popular launchpad for people from people escaping war and persecution across Africa to try to reach safety in Europe. The sinking is the latest such tragedy on the central Mediterranean, known as the world's deadliest migration route. — AFP

One dead, 8 hurt in stampede for free flour in Pakistan

PESHAWAR: One person was killed and eight others injured during a stampede for free flour in inflation-wracked Pakistan on Thursday, the first day of the holy month of Ramadan. The price of basic food items has rocketed in recent months, with inflation at a near 50 year-high as the country grapples with a balance of payments crisis that has seen it forced back into negotiations with the International Monetary Fund.

"Nine people were trampled and were taken to hospital where one person died," said Muhammad Arif, police chief for Charsadda in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province where the incident happened. Arif said hundreds of people gathered at the local market for the handouts, one of hundreds of distribution points set up by the government during Ramadan. Millions of low income families across the country are registered under the scheme. In a nearby district, a man died and four others were injured when a wall they were sitting on collapsed as crowds amassed for free flour. Authorities told AFP it was not clear why the wall collapsed.—AFP