

International

China vows to 'fight back' if Taiwan leader meets US speaker

Tsai's trip follows Honduras's decision to open diplomatic relations with Beijing

TAIPEI: China vowed on Wednesday to "fight back" should Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen meet the US House speaker during a trip to the United States. Tsai left on Wednesday for the United States, from where she will head to Guatemala and Belize to shore up ties with diplomatic allies. On her way back to Taiwan she will stop in California, where US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy had said he would meet her.

China claims the democratic island as part of its territory to be retaken one day and, under its "One China" principle, no country may maintain official ties with both Beijing and Taipei. Beijing warned Wednesday that it was "resolutely opposed" to any meeting between Tsai and McCarthy and vowed to take "resolute measures to fight back" if it goes ahead.

"If (Tsai) engages with US House Speaker McCarthy, it will be another provocation that seriously violates the One China principle, undermines China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and undermines peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait," Taiwan Affairs Office spokesperson Zhu Fenglian said.

Tsai's trip follows Honduras's decision this month to open diplomatic relations with Beijing, leaving Belize and Guatemala among just 13 countries that have official ties with Taipei. "External pressure will not hinder our determination to go global," Tsai told reporters at the airport before leaving. "We are calm and confident. We will not succumb and we will not provoke (others)."

US call for calm

After first visiting New York, Tsai will meet her Guatemalan counterpart Alejandro Giammattei and Belize Prime Minister John Briceno in their respective countries, her office said. She will then stop in Los Angeles on her way home. McCarthy has said he will meet Tsai in California, although the talks are yet to be confirmed by Taiwanese authorities.

A visit by McCarthy's predecessor to Taiwan last year sparked an angry response from Beijing, with the Chinese military conducting drills at an unprecedented scale around the island. "There's absolutely no reason for China to use that as a pretext to overreact or to engage in further coercion directed at Taiwan," a senior US administration official told reporters on condition of anonymity, adding that the stopover did not represent a change in US policy. Beijing's foreign ministry said Washington "blindly connives with and supports Taiwan independence and secessionist forces". Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning urged the United States at a briefing on Wednesday to stop any form of official exchanges with Taiwan and to "stop the dangerous act of undermining the political foundation of China-US relations".

Official vs unofficial ties

Analysts say the US stopover comes at a key time, with Beijing having ramped up military, economic and diplomatic pressure on Taiwan since Tsai came to power in 2016, poaching nine of its diplomatic allies.

"Beijing's attempts to poach Taiwan's diplomatic partners will lead to Taiwan developing closer ties with the United States," said James Lee, a researcher on US-Taiwan relations at Academia Sinica. The United States remains Taiwan's most important ally—and its biggest arms supplier—despite switching its diplomatic recognition to Beijing in 1979.

"The loss of official relations with third countries will be offset by a deepening of Taiwan's unofficial relations," Lee said. Recent visits by a Czech delegation and a German minister met rebukes from Beijing.

One of Tsai's most prominent domestic opponents, ex-president Ma Ying-jeou, was in China on Wednesday, the first such trip by a former Taiwanese leader. Ma spoke of the need for peace at a war memorial in Nanjing. "Both sides should avoid war, seek peace," Ma told Chinese media. "Because once a war happens, there is nothing that can make up the losses."

Diplomatic battleground

China has increased investment in Latin America, a key diplomatic battleground between Taipei and Beijing since the two sides split in 1949 after a civil war. Taiwan accused China on Sunday of using "coercion and intimidation" to lure away its allies after Honduran Foreign Minister Enrique Reina and his Chinese counterpart Qin Gang officially launched relations in Beijing.

Honduras, one of the poorest countries in the region,



TAOYUAN: Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen waves as she arrives at the boarding gate of the international airport in Taoyuan on March 29, 2023. Tsai was due to leave for the United States on March 29, a stop on her way to firm ties with Guatemala and Belize. —AFP

made the switch due to economic necessity, Reina had said earlier. The move continued a trend in Latin America, with Nicaragua, El Salvador, Panama, the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica all switching diplomatic recognition to Beijing in recent years.

In addition to Guatemala and Belize, Taiwan still has official ties with a handful of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, including Paraguay and Haiti. —AFP

India offers arms hardware to Africa

PUNE: India showed off domestically made helicopters, drones and artillery at a gathering of army chiefs and officials from 31 African nations on Wednesday, as the world's largest arms importer seeks to become a major exporter too. India has pumped billions into its defence sector in an effort to become less reliant on imports, including from Russia, as it faces off against China on their disputed border.

At the same time it has been trying to sell more of its domestically produced hardware to other countries, particularly poorer nations unable to afford more expensive Western-made kit. "We are making equipment which is affordable and reliable," retired Indian army general VG Patankar told AFP at the event.

On Wednesday, the Indian military showed off the goods on offer with a simulated operation featuring commandos abseiling from helicopters, armoured vehicles and bomb disposal robots. Also on display in Pune in western India—the country's key defence manufacturing hub—were assault rifles, artillery shells and models of missiles.

The gathering, which followed nine days of joint military drills with soldiers from 23 African countries, included delegates from Ethiopia, Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, Rwanda and South Africa. India opened its largest helicopter manufacturing plant in February, months after it unveiled its first locally made



PUNE: Chief of Indian Army Staff General Manoj Pande (C) meets army delegates during the India-Africa Army Chief's conclave in Pune. —AFP

aircraft carrier and test-fired a ballistic missile from its maiden domestic nuclear-powered submarine.

The country aims to more than double its annual arms exports to \$5 billion in the coming years, from about \$1.7 billion currently. Less than 20 percent of its arms exports currently go to Africa, with customers including Egypt,

Ethiopia, Mozambique, Mauritius and the Seychelles, officials said on condition of anonymity. S.P. Shukla, head of the Society of Indian Defence Manufacturers, told AFP that the focus of the Africa sales pitch was "defensive" in nature, including armoured vehicles, radars, telecommunication equipment. —AFP

India welcomes birth of four cheetah cubs

NEW DELHI: India announced on Wednesday the birth of four cubs to one of the cheetahs that were relocated from Namibia, decades after they were declared extinct in the South Asian country. India's Environment Minister Bhupendra Yadav tweeted a photo and video of the cubs, calling it a "momentous event".

"Wonderful news," tweeted Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Eight Namibian cheetahs arrived in India last year as part of an ambitious project to reintroduce the spotted big cats, the world's fastest land animal. A second cheetah from Namibia is also due to deliver soon, according to Indian media reports.

Last month, 12 more cheetahs were brought to India from South Africa. The announcement of the new cubs comes just days after one of the eight Namibian cheetahs died at the Kuno National Park, a wildlife sanctuary 320 kilometres (200 miles) south of New Delhi, due to kidney failure.

India was once home to the Asiatic cheetah but it was declared extinct there in 1952. The critically endangered subspecies, which once roamed across the Middle East, Central Asia and India, are now only found, in very small numbers, in Iran. —AFP

Europe rights court hears climate cases against governments

STRASBOURG: Cases opened Wednesday before the European Court of Human Rights against France and Switzerland over alleged failings to protect the environment, marking the first time governments are in the court's dock for alleged climate change inaction.

The case against Switzerland is based on a complaint by an association of elderly people—who call themselves the "Club of Climate Seniors"—concerned with the consequences of global warming on their living conditions and health, the ECHR said.

They accuse the Swiss authorities of various climate change failings which they say amount to a violation of the government's obligation to protect life and citizens' homes and families. "We've been fighting for years," said Bruna Molinari, 81, who lives in the southern Tessin canton "where the pollution is the worst". "I hope the court will find in our favour so that Switzerland does better than it has done so far," he added ahead of the hearing.

The average age is 73 in the Swiss club, which is backed by Greenpeace Switzerland. Around 50 of its 2,000 members were expected in Strasbourg for the hearing.

'Heat kills'

Alain Chablais, representing the Swiss government, told the court that it was "baseless to claim or suggest that Switzerland is doing nothing". The ECHR "has no business becoming the place where national climate protection policy is decided," he added.

But the plaintiffs' lawyer Jessica Simor said her clients were "already suffering the effects of climate change" that Switzerland was not doing enough to stop. Temperatures were rising "twice as quickly" in the Alpine nation as the global average, she added.

"Heat kills... increasing the risks of kidney problems, asthma attacks, cardiovascular difficulties... and causes particularly acute symptoms in elderly people, more especially elderly women". The case against France was brought by Damien Careme, a former mayor of Grande-Synthe, a suburb of



STRASBOURG: German protesters demonstrate ahead of the European Court of Human Rights hearing in two climate change cases involving France and Switzerland, in Strasbourg, eastern France, on March 29, 2023. —AFP

Dunkirk in northern France, who also argues that the central government has failed to meet its obligation to protect life by taking insufficient steps to prevent climate change.

When he was mayor, Careme brought his case to the French judiciary on behalf of his town but also on his own behalf, saying climate change was raising the risk of his home being flooded. France's highest administrative court ruled in favour of the town against the central government in 2021, but threw out the individual case brought by Careme, which he then took to the ECHR.

'Extremely high stakes'

"The stakes are extremely high," said Corinne Lepage, a former French ecology minister and one of Careme's lawyers in the case. "If the European court recognises that climate failings violate the rights of individuals to life and a normal family life, then that becomes precedent in all of the council's member states and potentially in the whole world," she told AFP.

The European Court of Human Rights—whose members are the 46 states belonging to the Council of Europe—acknowledged in a statement

ahead of the hearings that the European Convention on Human Rights, on which it must base its judgements, does not actually include a right to a healthy environment.

But its decision to take Wednesday's cases was based on the fact that the exercise of the convention's existing rights could be undermined by harm to the environment or exposure to environmental risks. A third pending case, without a date for a hearing so far, was brought by young Portuguese applicants claiming that climate inaction by dozens of states had contributed to heatwaves in Portugal which they said was affecting their rights.

Although the cases are a first for the ECHR, governments have in the past been taken to court in their national jurisdictions. In 2019, the Dutch Supreme Court ordered the government to cut greenhouse gas emissions following a complaint by an environmental organisation.

Two years later, a court in Paris found the French government guilty of climate inaction and ordered it to pay for resulting damages after four NGOs filed a case. Wednesday's hearings are only the start of proceedings that are likely to take several months before the court hands down its verdicts. —AFP

Philippine fishermen struggle as oil spill keeps them ashore

POLA: A crab covered in oil creeps across the sand as Philippine fishermen wearing white protective suits, rubber gloves, and respirator masks scrape toxic sludge from the rocks along the shore. Four weeks after a Philippine tanker loaded with 800,000 litres (210,000 gallons) of thick oil sank off the central island of Mindoro, the vessel is still leaking.

More than half the oil has been discharged and dispersed over hundreds of kilometres of waters famed for having some of the most diverse marine life in the world. Experts estimate the two main slicks northwest and southeast of the tanker could span 162 square kilometres (62 square miles).

It took two days for the spill to reach Buhay na Tubig, a remote village in Pola, one of the island's worst-affected municipalities. Some villagers got sick after oil smeared the shoreline, turning rocks black and leaving dark globs on the beach.

Authorities have banned fishing and swimming indefinitely, leaving thousands of fishermen wondering how long they can survive. "They say this might take six months, but what if we are unable to fish for an entire year?" asked Arvie Anonuevo, 32, who has three children. For more than two weeks, Anonuevo and other fishermen have spent four hours a day cleaning up oil in exchange for a daily wage of 355 pesos (\$6.50) from the government—a little over half what they used to make from fishing. —AFP



POLA: Fishermen wearing personal protective equipment assemble an oil spill boom during a clean-up operation from the sunken tanker Princess Empress along the shore in Pola, Oriental Mindoro province. —AFP