

Asia

French journo report slammed:

Chinese officials have accused a French journalist of political bias for her reporting on Beijing's efforts to equate ethnic violence in the western Muslim region of Xinjiang with global terrorism.

In response to the Nov 18 article by Ursula Gauthier in *Le Monde* Observateur, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Wednesday criticized Western media for using double standards in reporting the violence and said terrorism should not be considered ethnic violence in Xinjiang.



Xi

China under its President **Xi Jinping** blames much of the violence on the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, although many international observers question if the group exists in any organized form.

Rights groups also have argued that the violence largely stems from economic marginalization of ethnic Uighurs (WEE-gurs) and what is seen as suppression of their culture and religion. (AP)

Gao out of contact for 3 days:

Wife of the prominent Chinese political dissident Gao Zhiheng says her husband has been out of contact for three days after he voiced support for a fellow activist who was sentenced to prison last week.

Gao, a rights lawyer who defended members of the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement and alleged Chinese authorities tortured him while in detention, has been under tight surveillance since his release from jail in the summer of 2014. His latest disappearance could indicate he is being punished for again speaking out.

Geng He, who lives in the United States, said Wednesday that her daily contact with Gao was severed Sunday and that later calls yielded a message that his number no longer existed.

Gao praised fellow activist Yang Maodong in an online article dated Saturday. (AP)

Australia hack blamed on China:

Australia's weather bureau has been hit by a major cyber attack blamed on China by officials who estimated the possible repair bill at hundreds of millions of dollars, according to a report Wednesday.

Hackers got inside computer systems at the Bureau of Meteorology, which owns one of the nation's largest supercomputers and has links to the defence department, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported.

ABC did not state when the attack occurred but quoted an unnamed official as saying: "It's China."

It added that the bureau — which provides climate information spanning Australia and Antarctic territories — held valuable scientific research and its systems were linked to several sensitive government agencies.

An insider said repairing the breach could cost "hundreds of millions of dollars."

China has been accused of organised hacking against the US government and private firms, and in other countries as far afield as South Africa.

In June US officials said Chinese hackers had stolen records of millions of current and former government employees. China issued a denial. (AFP)

Oz band member's body found:

The body of an Australian former Hells Angels member who was abducted at gunpoint by a group of masked men in Thailand has been discovered in a woodland grave, police said Wednesday.

Wayne Rodney Schneider, 37, was kidnapped on Monday by a gang of men, believed to be foreigners, outside his house in Pattaya, a seaside resort town notorious for its sprawling red light district and links with organised crime.

Police launched a frantic search after security guards saw the Australian beaten unconscious and then bundled into the back of a van which sped off.

But their search took a grim turn late Tuesday when his corpse was discovered outside the city.

"He was murdered. His body was buried two metres deep in a woodland area out of town," Police Colonel Sukthak Pumphumuang, commander of Pattaya city police, told AFP.

Police have named their chief suspect as Antonio Bagnato, a 27-year-old Australian national.

Media reported that Schneider and Bagnato had been out drinking together the night before the kidnap. Sukthak said five people were believed to be involved in the kidnap and murder. (AFP)

Indonesia boat captain testifies:

The captain of an asylum-seeker boat allegedly intercepted by the Australian navy has told a court how he negotiated a hefty payment to take the migrants back to Indonesia to avoid going home "empty-handed".

Indonesian captain Yohanis Humiang, 35, is standing trial on charges of people-smuggling after Australian officials allegedly stopped his boat in May and paid him and his crew \$32,000 to return to Indonesia.

Five crew members are also being tried in a separate trial on Rote Island, eastern Indonesia. All six face a minimum of five years in jail and maximum of 15 if found guilty.

Claims that Australia paid to turn the asylum seekers back to Indonesia renewed tensions over the issue of migrant boats, which has long been a flashpoint between the neighbours.

Humiang told the court how his boat, carrying 65 mostly Sri Lankan migrants, was intercepted as it tried to head to New Zealand, and he was taken aboard an Australian navy ship.

"I was interrogated," Humiang told the court on Tuesday, adding that he negotiated for 30 minutes with officials before the payment was agreed. (AFP)



The Kuala Lumpur Tower (center, back), and other commercial buildings are seen through a window of Malaysia's landmark Petronas Twin Towers after a heavy downpour of rain in Kuala Lumpur on Dec 1. (AFP)

Maritime

Manila has good chance of success in Sea legal case

'China may pay international price'

HONG KONG/MANILA, Dec 2, (RTRS): When an international court ruled in late October that it had jurisdiction to hear a case filed by the Philippines against China over the disputed South China Sea, Beijing dismissed the decision, saying it would "lead to nothing".

Philippine officials as well as some foreign diplomats and experts disagree, saying China could come under intensified diplomatic and legal pressure if the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague ultimately decides in favour of Manila.

Legal experts say Manila has a significant chance of success, citing the court's detailed rejection of China's arguments in the hearing on jurisdiction. A final ruling is expected in mid-2016.

Such a judgment would likely be a millstone around China's neck, especially at regional meetings, because it would mark the first time an international court has intervened in the dispute, making it harder for Beijing to ignore, the diplomats and experts said.

Barely noticed when Manila filed the case in 2013 and largely seen as a sideshow since then to the tensions playing out on the waterway itself, some Asian and Western countries have started expressing growing support for the court process.

One expert said if the ruling went against China on key points he would expect to see coordinated positions from Western nations

that would keep the pressure on Beijing in bilateral meetings and at international forums.

Stick

"Other countries will use it as a stick to beat Beijing with. That's why China is so freaked by this whole issue," said Ian Storey, a South China Sea expert at Singapore's Institute of South East Asian Studies.

Added Bonnie Glaser, a security expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington: "That's the dirty little secret here ... the Chinese have pretended that it's going to be easy to ignore and reject. I think in reality they will have to pay an international price for it."

Manila is seeking a ruling on its right to exploit South China Sea waters in its 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ) as allowed under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The treaty does not cover matters of sovereignty, but outlines a system of territory and economic zones that can be claimed from features such as islands, rocks and reefs.

China, which claims virtually all the South China Sea, has refused to take part and rejects the court's authority in the case, even though it has ratified UNCLOS. The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan also claim parts of the waterway.

Any ruling against China would

be legally binding but unenforceable beyond political pressure because there is no body to enforce such rulings, legal experts say.

The Permanent Court of Arbitration declined to comment.

China's Foreign Ministry on Tuesday reiterated that Beijing would not accept any decision imposed on China. On Nov 24, it said the case was a "futile attempt to deny China of its territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea".

Michael Wesley, a professor in international affairs at the Australian National University, said China would not feel bound by any ruling.

"The South China Sea is a classic example of how China thinks about, and is probably succeeding in, rejecting and displacing US primacy in the region, without really risking (major) conflict," he said.

Accept

To many diplomats, the case is key to getting China to accept international legal norms over the waterway, through which \$5 trillion in ship-borne trade passes each year.

A number of countries have requested to observe the Hague proceedings, including claimants Vietnam and Malaysia as well as Japan, Thailand, Singapore, Australia and the United Kingdom.

Washington has backed the court process while during a visit to Beijing in October, German

Chancellor Angela Merkel suggested China go to international courts to resolve its rows over the South China Sea.

After talks in Sydney on Nov 22, the foreign and defence ministers of Australia and Japan said they supported the right of South China Sea claimants to seek arbitration.

By refusing to take part in the process, China has forgone the opportunity to formally defend its claims, shown on Chinese maps as a nine-dash line stretching into the maritime heart of Southeast Asia.

Manila is challenging the legality of the line, as well as China's actions within it.

By getting a ruling on its right to exploit waters within its EEZ, Manila hopes to force China to retreat from several shoals and reefs within the zone.

Diplomats and oil industry sources said international energy lawyers would scrutinise the final ruling to see if it clarified rights in contested blocks off the Philippines and Vietnam.

Hanoi made a submission to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in support of Manila's case but has not launched its own action against China. The Vietnamese government did not respond to a request for comment.

Indonesia's security chief said last month that Jakarta could take Beijing to court over the nine-dash line.



This handout picture taken by the Imperial Household Agency on Nov 16, and received on Dec 2 shows Japanese Prince Mikasa (left), and his wife Princess Yuriko (right), at their residence in Tokyo. Prince Mikasa, the youngest brother of late wartime Emperor Hirohito and the country's longest-living royal in modern times, celebrated his 100th birthday on Dec 2. (AFP)



Poe



Aquino

Frontrunner barred

A Philippine senator abandoned in a church as a baby and until now the favourite to succeed Benigno Aquino as president was barred on Tuesday from running.

Three members of the second division of the Commission on Election (Comelec) said Grace Poe could not run for president in elections in May because she fails to meet the 10-year residency requirement.

Poe, a naturalised American, returned to the Philippines when her adoptive father, who ran for president and lost, died in late 2004. Six years later, she renounced her US citizenship when Aquino appointed her to a government post.

"I am disappointed in the decision, but this is not the end of the process," Poe said in a statement. "I have faith in the process, and we are confident that the Comelec ban will side with the interest of the people."

Poe's camp said it would appeal against the decision to Comelec before elevating it to the Supreme Court.

Aquino, in power since 2010, is barred under the constitution from seeking a second term.

Under Aquino, the Philippines has seen annual economic growth of more than six percent on average, its best five-year record in four decades. He has also battled to rein in corruption.

The May election will be closely watched by investors, who fear the political succession could derail gains made during Aquino's rule. (RTRS)

Singapore police extend probe:

Singapore police have a further eight weeks to complete their investigation into a Belgian financial executive charged with murdering his five-year-old son, after

state prosecutors Wednesday requested more time.

Philippe Graffart, 42, has been charged with murder — an offence punishable in Singapore by hanging — for the death of his son, Keryan, at an upmarket condominium in October.

Graffart's lawyer, Ramesh Tiwary, had no objections to the state prosecutors' request during a pre-trial appearance at a district court.

Graffart was arrested before dawn on October 6 after arriving at a police station with self-inflicted wounds and was

charged with murder on Oct 7. He will continue to be held at the central police division until the next pre-trial hearing on Jan 29.

He was moved from a medical complex at Changi Prison to the central police division near the trial court in late November

following more than a month of psychiatric assessment.

Local media reported that Graffart's son was found by police strangled in his bedroom with hand-shaped bruises around the neck. Graffart was believed to be fighting custody for the son with his former wife. (AFP)

Suu Kyi meets president:

Myanmar's democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi held talks Wednesday with the president and military chief about the handover of power, the first such discussions since her opposition party's election triumph.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party won nearly 80 percent of contested seats in a Nov 8 election that appears set to end the military's decades-long chokehold on the country.

Immediately after the poll she had appealed for "national reconciliation" talks with President Thein Sein and the powerful army chief.

Both men have congratulated her on the NLD's victory and vowed to ensure a smooth transition of power to an elected opposition — an unprecedented act in the country's history.

But opposition supporters remain wary of a military that has duped them before and retains significant political clout, including filling a quarter of all parliamentary seats. (AFP)



This picture taken on Nov 30, shows volunteers holding red ribbons above a piece of paper written in Chinese that reads 'Red ribbons bring warmth to everyone to prevent AIDS' during an event for World Aids Day in Chongqing. (AFP)

Malaysia plans to up age limit for 'drinking'

GENEVA, Dec 2, (RTRS): Malaysia plans to raise the minimum age for alcohol consumption from 18 to 21, it said in a filing to the World Trade Organization on Tuesday.

It did not say when the change would take place, but said it was part of a strategy aiming to prevent underage drinking and limit the accessibility of alcohol to high risk groups.

Malaysia also plans additional labelling requirements for alcohol products to warn about their effect on health, it said.

The filing to the WTO invites other members of the global trading body to comment on its plans within the next 60 days.