

North Korea

Drills unusual, low-key

Abe plan US visit to talk North Korea with Trump

TOKYO, April 2, (AP) — Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said Monday he plans to visit the US this month to discuss North Korea with President Donald Trump ahead of expected summits between the North and the US and South Korea.

Abe said he will travel to the US from April 17 to 20 and hold two days of talks with Trump at the president's Mar-a-Lago Club in Florida to discuss North Korea and bilateral issues. Trump has said he will meet North Korean leader Kim Jong Un by the end of May.



Abe

"I hope to thoroughly discuss North Korea and other issues of mutual interest between Japan and the US," Abe said at a meeting of representatives of his ruling coalition and the government.

In Washington, the White House said the meeting between the two leaders will "re-affirm the United States-Japan alliance as a cornerstone of peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region." Besides North Korea, they will "explore ways to expand fair and reciprocal trade and investment ties," it said.

Abe has said he wants to remind Trump of shorter-range missiles and other North Korean security threats for Japan, and seek US help on the issue of Japanese abducted by North Korea decades ago.

Abe is also expected to discuss stiff US tariffs on steel and aluminum imports and urge Trump to exclude Japan, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga told reporters.

The abductees' families last Friday urged Abe to seek Trump's help, saying this could be their last chance to win their aging loved ones' release.

Japan has said North Korea abducted at least 17 Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s to train agents in Japanese language and culture to spy on South Korea. North Korea, after years of denials, acknowledged in 2002 abducting 13 Japanese. It allowed five of them to visit Japan later that year — and they stayed — but said the other eight had died, though their families say the North's comments cannot be trusted.

Abe visited Trump's resort in February 2017, soon after the president took office.

Meanwhile, another spring on the Korean Peninsula, another round of war games by the US and South Korean militaries.

Drills

This week's drills, however, will feature a new and unusually low-key approach, with the allies resisting bringing in their big guns, and the North, for the time being, avoiding its usual belligerent propaganda against exercises that it claims are an invasion rehearsal.

The reason for this departure? There's interest in Washington and Seoul in nurturing a diplomatic outreach by North Korea's young leader, Kim Jong Un, after months of weapons tests and threats of nuclear war by the North.

On Sunday, the first day of this year's drills, instead of vowing to destroy Seoul, Kim attended a concert in Pyongyang of visiting South Korean pop singers, clapping his hands and asking for more such performances. Some questions and answers about this year's drills, which come ahead of two separate historic summits between Kim and his South Korean and US counterparts:

Question: Are the drills really more low-key than in past years?

Answer: Yes, they are.

This year's exercises were postponed because of the Pyeongyang Winter Olympics, where the Koreans worked out a series of rapprochement steps, including parading together behind a single flag during the opening ceremony and fielding a unified women's hockey team.

Seoul and Washington both publicly say the training this time will be similar to previous years. But South Korean defense officials say there are no immediate plans to bring in US aircraft carriers, powerful bombers or other strategic assets that have been deployed in and around the Korean Peninsula during past drills. The North loathes such American weapons.

The two sets of drills, one field-training and the other computer-simulated, typically run for two months, but this year's exercises are scheduled to last for just one month. The allies also have no immediate plans to publicize the training, according to Seoul's Defense Ministry.

Q: How will North Korea react to this year's drills?

A: North Korea's state media haven't said anything about the drills since their start. Even if there is some criticism later, it will likely be milder than past warlike rhetoric, which often saw daily threats to launch nuclear strikes on Seoul and Washington or void the armistice that ended the 1950-53 Korean War.

Kim told visiting South Korean officials last month that he "understands" the drills will take place and expressed hope that they'll be modified once the situation on the peninsula stabilizes, according to the South Korean government.

While diplomacy holds, it's also unlikely that North Korea will test any weapons, as it has during past drills. Such tests could endanger the North's outreach and crush the current rapprochement.

South Korea's Defense Ministry said Monday that it hadn't detected any suspicious activities by the North Korean military.

Q: What's next after the drills?

A: Kim's planned meeting with South Korean President Moon Jae-in on April 27 comes around the time the US-South Korean drills end.

The meeting will be the third-ever inter-Korean summit since the Koreans' 1945 division. It is crucial because it may offer insight about what nuclear disarmament steps Kim could offer, and what concessions the allies might be willing to provide.

It is unlikely that Kim will completely give up his nukes. Only last year he claimed to have functional nuclear missiles targeting the entire US mainland, though foreign experts believe the North still hasn't perfected such missiles. Kim's dictator father and grandfather long aspired to have such power.

During Kim's visit to China last week, his first overseas trip since taking office in 2011, he indicated that he prefers step-by-step, not immediate, disarmament-for-aid deals with the United States and South Korea. This could spell trouble because some hard-line US officials want the North to take immediate, complete disarmament steps so as not to repeat past negotiations in which the North was seen as winning badly needed aid while covertly continuing its bomb program.

Kim and President Donald Trump plan to meet in May, but the exact date and location of their meeting haven't been announced.



Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr, former senator and son of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, waves to his supporters after attending the recount of votes in the 2016 vice-presidential race at the Supreme Court, sitting as the Presidential Electoral Tribunal (PET) in Manila on April 2, 2018. (AFP)

Philippines starts vote recount in Marcos son's contest for VP

The Philippines on Monday began a manual recount of votes in a vice-presidential election after the son and namesake of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos contested the outcome, while the incumbent assured supporters her win was not in doubt.

Ferdinand Marcos Jr, a former senator popularly known as Bongbong, is furious about having lost to Leni Robredo by about 260,000 votes in a May 2016 election he says was marred by massive cheating.

Many political commentators believe Marcos has ambitions to become president one day, and wanted to use the vice-presidency as a stepping stone. Opinion polls had shown him the clear leader ahead of the vote, which is separate from that for the presidency.

The recount, ordered by the Supreme Court, began with Marcos questioning the condition of some ballots from the town of Bato in Robredo's home province of Camarines Sur.

"In four precincts in the town of Bato, all ballots are wet and thus useless," he told reporters. Alluding to foul play, he added that the ballots seemed to be "only recently wet".

Audit logs for most of the precincts were missing, he said, and he had seen a ballot box with a hole sealed with a masking tape.

"We have nothing to fear because the truth is what we are fighting for," Robredo, a one-term congresswoman before the 2016 election, said in a

speech after a mass service organised by her supporters in the largely Roman Catholic country.

Robredo, who hails from a decades-old political clique that opposes Duterte and helped oust Marcos in 1986, had lodged a counter protest, questioning results in about 8,000 voting precincts.

Although he was not his running mate, Marcos is on good terms with President Rodrigo Duterte, who has made numerous concessions to the Marcos family. (RTRS)

Media

S'pore activists criticise committee

Malaysia approves 'fake news' law

KUALA LUMPUR, April 2, (AFP) — Malaysia's government Monday pushed a law through parliament that makes "fake news" punishable by a maximum six-year jail term despite an outcry from critics worried it will be used to stifle dissent before elections.

The law targets foreign as well as local media, and is seen in part as an effort to silence criticism of the scandal surrounding sovereign wealth fund IMDB that has rocked the administration of Prime Minister Najib Razak.

The election is expected within weeks and Najib is battling to win a third term at the head of the coalition that has led Malaysia for over six decades.

The current parliament is dominated by the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. The law originally proposed a maximum prison sentence of 10 years and a fine of 500,000 ringgit (\$130,000) for publishing what authorities deem to be fake news, but the government lowered the jail term to six years following a storm of criticism.

"This law is not intended to restrict the freedom of speech but to restrict the dissemination of fake news," said minister Azalina Othman Said.

But opposition legislators were not convinced, criticising the law's heavy penalties and its potential to limit free speech. "This bill... is a weapon to close the truth so that what is false can be upheld as true, and what is true can be reversed as false," said Lim Guan Eng of the Democratic Action Party.

"This is something very dangerous for our country."

The law must still be debated in the senate but is expected to be passed. More than half of the senate is filled with Barisan Nasional members.

After this it needs royal assent before taking effect. The new law has sparked widespread anger from activists, press freedom groups and the opposition, who

believe it is aimed at cracking down on dissenting voices rather than safeguarding the public from false information.

Before it was passed, Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch, condemned it as a "blatant attempt by the government to prevent any and all news that it doesn't like, whether about corruption or elections".

He said it "uses draconian penalties and broad language in an audacious and unprecedented effort to control discussion of Malaysia worldwide".

The law covers any information that is deemed to be "wholly or partly fake".

It includes several examples, such as a blogger publishing a report known to be false; someone sharing information on social media they know to be false; and someone giving a speech containing information they know to be untrue.

Malaysia is one of several countries in Asia turning to such legislation, emboldened by US President Donald Trump's fulminations against "fake news", but activists warn authoritarian regimes will use the laws to target opponents.

Also:

SINGAPORE: Singapore activists Monday criticised a parliamentary committee which is examining possible legislation to combat "fake news", saying it had misrepresented their views and threatened those who gave evidence.

The 10-member committee was set up in January to tackle online falsehoods, which the government says can threaten national security.

The activists said in a joint statement that despite engaging in good faith, they were "harangued, harassed, threatened and misrepresented".

"Numerous leading questions were asked. Members of the Select Committee repeatedly insisted on yes or no answers to their questions, despite re-

peatedly being told of the importance of context and nuance," said the statement.

It was signed by civil liberty groups the Community Action Network (CAN); Function 8; journalist and activist **Kirsten Han**; **Terry Xu**, who runs an online blog; and historian **Thum Ping Tjin**.

Han, Xu, and **Jolovan Wham**, who was representing CAN, have lodged official complaints — saying that their testimonies had been "grossly misrepresented" in official daily summaries.

Separately, Human Rights Watch last week slammed the committee and declined to testify, calling it "an effort to discredit critics of Singapore's repressive policies and practices".

The Singapore government had earlier criticised the New York-based rights group as "biased and untruthful" after it failed to send a representative to testify.

During eight days of hearings which ended Thursday, the committee heard from 69 individuals and organisations including internet giants Facebook and Google. It will deliberate and work on a report when parliament reconvenes in May, chairman **Charles Chong** said.

Wealthy Singapore is among the countries looking to introduce legislation to rein in fake news, a move it says is intended to protect and enhance free speech. Critics have said it could be used to stifle free expression and control the media.

Neighbouring Malaysia on Monday passed a "fake news" law which punishes purveyors of alleged falsehoods by up to six years' jail on conviction.

Singapore is ranked 151st on the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, with Norway ranked the freest at number one. Officials in the city-state, however, say local media outlets enjoy high levels of credibility according to the Edelman Trust Barometer Index.



Indonesia's Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi delivers a speech at a government handover ceremony reuniting a group of captives recently returned from Libya with their families, at the Foreign Ministry in Jakarta on April 2. Six Indonesians were taken by an armed group off the coast of Libya and held for seven months until their release on March 27. (AFP)



Yi



Minh

Asia

Abe's cabinet disapproval rtg rises:

About half of Japanese voters don't support Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration amid suspected cronyism and cover-up, opinion polls by Japanese media showed.

The Yomiuri newspaper's survey issued on Monday showed that the disapproval rating for Abe's Cabinet rose to 50 percent from early March, compared with 47.5 percent in the Kyodo news agency's survey published on Sunday.

The support rate for the Cabinet showed a slight rise to 42.4 percent in the Kyodo poll, while the Yomiuri poll showed a drop of six points to 42 percent.

Both opinion polls were conducted between March 31-April 1.

The polls followed last week's testimony by ex-finance ministry official Nobuhisa Sagawa, who said neither Abe nor his wife influenced the murky sales of state-owned land to a school operator or the finance ministry's altering of documents about the deal. (RTRS)

Bid to keep peace in Sea: China and Vietnam vowed Sunday to keep the peace in the South China Sea, the resource-rich waterway that has long been a source of tension between Hanoi and its powerhouse communist neighbour.

China claims most of the disputed sea, which is believed to be rich in oil and gas reserves and is highly strategic for trade and defence.

Beijing has built up artificial islands capable of hosting military installations in recent years, stoking ire from claimants like Vietnam, which has emerged as China's most vocal opponent in the waterway.

Foreign ministers from China and Vietnam vowed Sunday to address disputes peacefully.

"Both sides should abide by the basic governing principles on resolving maritime issues. Both sides should not apply unilateral measures that would complicate the situation," China's Foreign Minister **Wang Yi** told reporters in Hanoi during an official visit to Vietnam.

His Vietnamese counterpart echoed calls to peacefully resolve disputes.

"We are ready to work with China to resolve arising issues," Vietnamese Foreign Minister **Pham Binh Minh** told reporters.

He added both sides should "properly manage differences, not expand disputes (and) respect legitimate rights and interests of the other in accordance with international law".

Taiwan, Brunei and the Philippines also

have claims in the sea. But the Philippines' China-friendly leader Rodrigo Duterte has backed off disputes with Beijing after a landmark international tribunal ruling in 2016 in Manila's favour. (AFP)

Stay united - Suu Kyi: Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi called on Sunday for her people to remain united, saying the Southeast Asian country faces "challenges" at home and abroad, as she

marked two years since her party swept to power in a historic vote.

In a televised speech, Suu Kyi made only a passing reference to the crisis in Rakhine state, where her government faces mounting international condemnation for a military operation against Rohingya Muslims that has sent nearly 700,000 members of the minority community fleeing to Bangladesh.

The Nobel Peace Prize laureate has also struggled to match the sky-high expectations that swept her National League for Democracy (NLD) to power in 2016, and is struggling to rebut criticism over slower economic growth and continued fighting with ethnic armed groups. (RTRS)

Asylum seekers at risk: The Pacific island of Nauru, where hundreds of asylum-seekers are held in a processing camp, has abolished its links with Australia's highest court in what critics said will leave vulnerable people without a right to appeal.

For more than four decades the High Court of Australia has been the final avenue for appeals on the island, where international monitors have raised concerns about civil rights.

Now it has emerged that the government of the tiny nation has severed its links with the Australian legal system, without yet establishing a new appeals process in its place. Nauru said ongoing cases would not be affected, but Australian human rights lawyer George Newhouse warned it could impact asylum-seekers sent by Canberra to camps in Nauru after trying to reach Australia by boat. (AP)



Local people who claim to be Rohingya Muslims eat food, in Krabi province, Thailand, on April 1. A boat with 56 people claiming to be Muslim Rohingya refugees from Myanmar was helped back to sea by Thai fishermen and navy cutter after being damaged in a storm and stopping temporarily on Sunday in southern Thailand. (AP)