

Japan

'Abe may quit in June'

China, Japan vow new starting point

TOKYO, April 16. (Agencies): Asian rivals China and Japan on Monday pledged a "new starting point" for bilateral ties, vowing close co-operation amid a flurry of diplomacy on the North Korean missile threat and global trade tensions.

Welcoming Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi for a rare three-day visit, Japanese Premier Shinzo Abe called for warmer relations between the two countries and said they should work together on North Korea.

Abe said he would be visiting the United States for talks with President Donald Trump to seek the "complete and irreversible denuclearisation" of North Korea and added "we want to co-operate with China."

"We hope to develop a strategic, mutually beneficial Japan-China relationship in various fields," said Abe.

After meeting Abe, Wang told reporters that Beijing wanted to place "Sino-Japanese cooperation at a new starting point" and cooperate on energy, financial and environmental issues.

Tokyo is battling to stay relevant amid a string of summits on North Korea's nuclear programme in which Beijing is likely to be a major player.

With this in mind, Japan is pushing to host a trilateral meeting between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

Abe said this would be held "after Golden Week", a series of national holidays that ends on May 6.

Bilateral visits by Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping are also being planned.

China demonstrated its significant influence over its reclusive ally when Xi hosted the North's leader Kim Jong-un and his wife in Beijing last month.

With Moon and Trump also preparing to meet Kim, reported efforts by Japan to reach out to Pyongyang have gone ignored.

Wang said he and Abe spoke about North Korea. "At present, the nuclear issue on the peninsula has clearly eased from a situation of a crippling crisis and has returned to the direction of denuclearisation," Wang said, reiterating Beijing's call for a political and peaceful settlement.

Meanwhile, Japan and China are targets of Trump's steel and aluminium tariffs, with Beijing also targeted with a further heavy levy.

Trump could link security with trade: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe could find his oft-touted close ties with Donald Trump sorely tested at a summit this week in which Tokyo fears the US leader will try to link vital security matters with touchy trade topics.

It is a fraught time for both sides, and comes as Trump prepares to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, whose government has been openly antagonistic toward Japan.

Abe is struggling with declining popularity because of suspected cronyism scandals. Trump, whose White House is grappling with scandals and investigations of its own, may be hunting for a political win ahead of November midterm congressional elections.

Japan wants Trump to avoid a deal in which Pyongyang gives up ballistic missiles that can hit the US mainland but keeps shorter-range missiles that threaten Japan. Abe also wants Trump to bring up Japanese citizens kidnapped by Pyongyang long ago.

At the summit with Trump on Tuesday and Wednesday, Tokyo is equally eager to avoid being pushed into talks on a two-way free trade agreement aimed not only at market access but at monetary and currency policies.

"If Abe brings up abductions and short and mid-range missiles, it's obvious that Trump will say, 'OK, do something on the economic side,'" said a Japanese ruling party lawmaker well-versed in US-Japan ties, who declined to be identified because the topic and timing are sensitive.

Trump's ability to give allies policy whiplash was on display last week when he said he'd asked aides to re-open talks on the multinational Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) that he abandoned last year. Afterward, he tweeted that the United States would only rejoin if offered "substantially better" terms and urged a bilateral deal with Japan, which "has hit us hard on trade for years!"

Abe may quit in June: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, plagued by suspected cronyism scandals and cover-ups and with his ratings sliding, will likely step down in June, former leader Junichiro Koizumi was quoted on Monday as telling a weekly magazine.

A survey by broadcaster Nippon TV released on Sunday showed Abe's support had sunk to 26.7 percent, the lowest since the conservative lawmaker took office in December 2012. An Asahi newspaper poll published on Monday put his rating at 31 percent.

Abe's sliding ratings raise doubts over whether he can win a third three-year term as ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leader in a September vote, that he needs to win to stay in office, or whether he might even resign before the party vote.

Speculation has also emerged that Abe could call a snap general election as he did last October, when his ratings were in a similar slump.

The prime minister has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing.

The latest signs of trouble for Abe come ahead of his summit this week with US President Donald Trump, where the difficult topics of North Korea's nuclear and missile threats and touchy trade matters will be on the agenda.

"The situation is getting dangerous. Won't Mr Abe resign around the time parliament's session ends (on June 20)?" weekly magazine Aera's online site quoted Koizumi as saying in an interview.

Koizumi — a critic of Abe's support for nuclear power after the 2011 Fukushima crisis — said that if Abe hangs on, it could hurt LDP candidates in an upper house election next summer.

Crowds of protestors demonstrated near parliament on Saturday, holding signs saying "Abe is Over" and chanting "Abe quit!" Organisers said 50,000 had participated by the time the demonstration ended.

Abe last week denied again that he had intervened to ensure preferential treatment for educational institution Kake Gakuen, run by his friend Kotaro Kake, to set up a veterinary school.

He has also repeatedly denied that he or his wife intervened in a heavily discounted sale of state-owned land to another school operator, Moritomo Gakuen, with ties to his wife.



Visitors are dwarfed by the gate in the shape of a tiger at the Central zoo in Pyongyang on April 15. (AP)



This handout photo released by Fire & Rescue NSW on April 16, 2018 shows firemen tackling a bush fire in Holdsworth, south of Sydney on April 15. Hundreds of fire-fighters were battling a large bushfire that burnt near Sydney homes, with authorities saying it was 'miraculous' no homes were damaged and no-one was injured. (AFP)



In this May 2014 photo released by Ben Cao, Rev John Sarquiang Cao breaks a ground on a new school in Wa State, Myanmar. The prominent Chinese pastor who has been detained by Chinese authorities since March 5, 2017 was sentenced in March 2018 to seven years in prison for 'organizing others to illegally cross the border'. (AP)

Asia

'Germ warfare' unit names: A group of Japanese scholars is set to reveal the names of the members of a Japanese World War II germ warfare unit that infected and starved Chinese and allied POWs in a series of gruesome experiments.

Katsuo Nishiyama, professor emeritus of Shiga University of Medical Science in western Japan, has told local media his team is analysing a list of 3,607 members and plans to publish it online to encourage further historical study of the unit.

"This is the first time that we see a list of the names of nearly all its members being released in the form of an official document," the Mainichi Shimbun daily quoted Nishiyama as saying.

Unit 731 of the Imperial Japanese Army was set up in Manchuria after Japan formed a puppet state in northeastern China in 1931.

Its members — some of them physicians from Japan's top medical universities — conducted human experiments, injecting plague and other germs into their victims, testing germ bombs, and artificially causing frostbite to victims while depriving them of sleep and food. (AFP)

Site urges to report spies: China, under President Xi Jinping, has stepped up its campaign against foreign espionage with a website in Mandarin and English encouraging people to report national security threats such as bids to "overthrow the socialist system".

The website, www.12339.gov.cn, launched by the Ministry of National Security on Sunday, also urges anyone to report attempts by Chinese nationals or foreigners to bribe state or military officials, instigate armed riots or incite ethnic separatism.

Potential problematic behaviour also includes foreigners meeting "any person within China who has conducted activities endangering state security or is strongly

Philippines

Filibeck critical of Duterte

EU party official barred

MANILA, Philippines, April 16. (AFP): The Philippines has barred entry to an EU party official critical of President Rodrigo Duterte's brutal drugs crackdown, in a move denounced by critics Monday as a gag on dissent.

Italian Giacomo Filibeck was detained by border police upon his arrival at Cebu airport Sunday and deported for engaging in "partisan political activity", Philippine immigration authorities and his party said.

Filibeck, the deputy secretary-general of the Party of European Socialists, flew to the Philippines at the invitation of opposition party Akbayan to attend a congress.

He had been part of a delegation of European politicians who conducted an October 2017 fact-finding mission in the Philippines which denounced the "extra-judicial killings" of thousands of people in Duterte's anti-drug crackdown.

"This is a gag order to all and sundry that you cannot look into the human rights situation in the Philippines," Akbayan congressman Tom Villarin told AFP.

"Actions of the Duterte government ... really show that degree of impunity has risen to the level of a dictatorship," he added.

Duterte has launched an unprecedented campaign against illegal drugs since winning elections in mid-2016.

Police say they have killed 4,100 drug suspects as part of the campaign, while rights groups claim the toll is

around three times the official figure.

The Philippine bureau of immigration said Filibeck had violated conditions of his stay as a tourist.

"Mr Filibeck has been blacklisted by the (immigration bureau) for violation of our immigration laws which prohibit aliens staying in our country from engaging in political activities," Justice Secretary Menardo Guevarra told AFP.

Duterte's spokesman described the move as an "exercise of sovereignty".

"The socialist leader was one of those that we determined as a person that we don't want to be in our territory," presidential spokesman Harry Roque told reporters.

Manila and the European Union have clashed over the drugs crackdown, with Brussels saying it was a matter of "serious concern", while Duterte has rejected criticism from the "stupid organisation" and angrily turned down an invitation to an Asia-Europe summit.

Filibeck's party denounced his deportation, adding it had informed EU diplomatic chief Federica Mogherini of the incident.

"It is completely unacceptable that a PES political representative ... should be treated as a criminal on the orders of the government," party president Sergei Stanishev said in a statement on its website.

"We refuse to be silenced. We will continue to express our solidarity with the democratic opposition to Mr Duterte's increasingly authoritarian rule in the Philippines."

yuan (\$1,500 to \$73,000) for information on spies, the official Beijing Daily reported last April. (AFP)

Park won't appeal jail term: South Korea's disgraced former president Park Geun-hye will not appeal her 24-year prison sentence for corruption, reports said Monday.

Park, 66, who was removed from office over a massive corruption scandal last year, was convicted of multiple criminal charges including bribery and abuse of power at a trial earlier this month.

She has boycotted all court hearings since October, claiming unfair treatment.

On Monday Park submitted an appeal waiver to the Seoul Central District Court to override an appeal filed by her younger sister last week, Yonhap news agency cited court officials as saying.

But an appeal hearing will nonetheless take place as prosecutors are seeking harsher punishment. The Yonhap report said Park would

boycott the process.

The wide-ranging corruption scandal which broke last year prompted massive street protests against Park across the country and led to her impeachment.

Park and her close confidante Choi Soon-sil were the key figures in the scandal involving charges of graft, influence-peddling and taking bribes from corporate bigwigs in exchange for policy favours.

Park is the third former South Korean leader to be convicted on criminal charges after leaving office, joining Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo. They were both found guilty of treason and corruption in the 1990s. (AFP)



Choi

S. Korea murder accused dies: A South Korean charged with murdering his wife and young son at Hong Kong's luxury Ritz-Carlton hotel died in custody Monday, police said.

Kim Min-ho was found unconscious at the maximum-security Lai Chi Kok detention centre Monday morning and later declared dead in hospital, police and media reports said.

A note was found at the scene, according to a police statement, which described him only as a 43-year-old foreign man.

Police gave no details on how Kim died but local media reported he had committed suicide.

Police had rushed to the harbourfront hotel in January after receiving a report that a man and woman guest were fighting.

Kim's wife and six-year-old son were found dead at the scene, his wife with multiple cuts to her neck and his six-year-old son with a throat wound.

Kim was believed to have consumed alcohol and appeared unconscious in the hotel suite with minor wounds to his hand and face, police said at the time.

They retrieved a five-inch-long knife from the room and Kim was arrested. (AFP)

Kim, Chinese envoy meet: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has met with a high-ranking Chinese diplomat in Pyongyang, amid a flurry of diplomacy following Kim's recent surprise visit to Beijing.

Song Tao, who heads the ruling Communist Party's International Department, led an art troupe to Pyongyang to attend an arts festival, according to China's Foreign Ministry.

Kim made an unannounced trip to Beijing last month ahead of potentially breakthrough meetings with South Korean President Moon Jae-in and US President Donald Trump.

Kim's trip, during which he met with Chinese President Xi Jinping, was considered an attempt to repair traditionally warm ties with China that have deteriorated over North Korea's development of ballistic missile and nuclear weapons technology and China's enforcement of United Nations economic sanctions.

Kim said during his meeting with Song on Saturday that he and Xi "reached important consensus" in Beijing, according to China's official Xinhua News Agency. (AP)

Mahathir to contest Langkawi: Malaysia's opposition on Sunday named former premier Mahathir Mohamad as their candidate for the island seat of Langkawi, as expected, shifting their election campaign into higher gear ahead of national polls on May 9.

Mahathir, 92, leads the opposition as their choice of prime minister to depose his former protege, Prime Minister Najib Razak, in what will likely be the most tightly-contested polls since independence in 1957.

Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, president of the opposition Pakatan Harapan coalition, said Mahathir had done much for Langkawi, from the time he first set foot on the holiday island as a government doctor in 1956 to the time he ruled as prime minister from 1981 until his resignation in 2003.

Pakatan Harapan earlier this year named Mahathir as its prime ministerial candidate. (RTS)

7 killed in building collapse: A group of teenagers practising for a dance and music show were among seven people killed Monday when the building they were in collapsed, police said.

The accident happened in Cirebon, about 220 kilometres (135 miles) east of Jakarta.

A tall warehouse next door collapsed and then crushed the local art centre where the junior high school students were preparing for a show, according to police.

"A nine-metre tall building suddenly collapsed onto the art centre right next to it," local police chief Trunoyudo Wisnu Andiko told AFP.

"The art centre also collapsed immediately and buried some children."

Authorities initially said just one part of the warehouse had fallen onto the art centre. (AFP)

Campbell next Aussie defense chief: An Australian army general who led a secretive military operation to stop asylum seekers from coming to Australia by boat was named on Monday as the country's next defense force chief.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said Lt Gen Angus Campbell will replace Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin as chief of the Australian Defense Force in July. Binskin will retire after four years in the top job.

Campbell came to public attention as the commander of Operation Sovereign Borders, an operation established by a newly elected conservative government in 2013 to stop thousands of asylum seekers from the Middle East, Africa and Asia from reaching Australian shores in rickety Indonesian fishing boats at a rate of 37 boats a month.

No asylum seeker boat has reached Australia since July 2014, although the government is secretive about what tactics are used to stop them.

The government recently announced that 32 boats carrying 800 people had been turned back to Indonesia since 2013, a practice that Indonesians consider an affront to their sovereignty.

Campbell was promoted to chief of the army in 2015. (AP)



Xi



Park