

World News Roundup

Japan

Emperor symbol of peace

Akihito pushed imperial boundaries in outreach

TOKYO, Aug 13, (RTRS): When Japanese Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko stood, heads bowed, at a seaside cliff on Saipan 60 years after a bloody World War Two battle, their silent prayers conveyed a message many felt resonated louder than words.

On that June 2005 visit - one of many war-related trips during Akihito's three-decade reign - the royal couple paid their respects at memorials not only for Japanese but also American and Korean war dead.

"I think the emperor felt heartfelt pain and mourning for those who died, and that we must not forget the tragedy of the war and should convey that to the generations who have not experienced it," Shingo Haketa, former grand steward of the Imperial Household Agency, which manages the monarch's affairs, told Reuters in an exclusive interview.



Akihito

Haketa and a half-dozen other associates of the emperor recounted to Reuters how after the death of his father on Jan 7, 1989, Akihito carved out an active role as symbol of peace, democracy and reconciliation.

Although he cannot directly influence government policy, Akihito has created a broader consciousness of Japan's wartime past, experts say.

That is a sharp departure from the legacy of his father, Hirohito - once revered as a "living god" in whose name Japan fought World War Two. Hirohito's comments about the conflict were vague after Japan's defeat, and he remained a divisive figure because of his role.

Akihito, 84, will abdicate next year. On Aug 15, he will for the last time as reigning emperor take part in an annual memorial ceremony honouring war dead held on the anniversary of Japan's surrender.

His retirement comes amid tensions with China and the Koreans, and his legacy appears threatened by a Japanese drift to the right mirrored in Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's conservative agenda.

Japanese political leaders have expressed regret, remorse and apology for their country's wartime actions. But remarks by the emperor have a different weight, experts say.

Symbolic

"Emperors are like popes - their gestures carry a symbolic message," said Andrew Horvat, a visiting professor at Japan's Josai International University.

Politicians have sometimes undercut official apologies, but Akihito's message has remained consistent.

"People see (Akihito and Michiko) as sincerely and respectfully trying to reach out to wartime victims in a deeply symbolic and very reconciliatory way," said Jennifer Lind, a Dartmouth College professor who has written about apologies.

Friends and scholars credit Akihito's post-war education with laying the foundations for how he forged his role. Influences included Quaker tutor Elizabeth Vining and former Keio University head Shinzo Koizumi, who saw many of his students die in the conflict.

"Currently, most Japanese people think that the emperor is gentle and kind," Mototsugu Akashi, a former classmate, told Reuters. "But that is clearly a post-war phenomenon." The makeover of the monarchy began after Japan's surrender in 1945, when Akihito was 11.

In theory, the emperor can say what he likes as long as his remarks don't violate the post-war constitution, which defines the emperor as "the symbol of the State and the unity of the People", devoid of governmental power and unable to interfere in politics.

In practice, Akihito's public remarks are carefully vetted to ensure they don't violate those rules, with delicate discussions determining how forthright he can be.

Akihito strained against those limits, say those who know him.

"I know that for one or two speeches, he was angry with the Imperial Household Agency and foreign ministry about the words to be used," said Michael Barrett, who knew Akihito while head of the British Council in Japan during the 1990s.

"It was said that they (the imperial couple) were birds in a gilded cage, but he opened the door of that cage," he added.

In one early example, Seoul in May 1990 wanted the new emperor to apologise for Japan's often brutal 1910-1945 colonisation of the Korean peninsula.

Ruling party lawmakers objected, and prime minister Toshiki Kaifu offered to apologise instead to South Korean president Roh Tae Woo.

Akihito, however, had his own ideas.

"The current emperor wanted to make clear that it was Japan that caused the suffering of the Korean people," Makoto Watanabe, a former imperial grand chamberlain, an aide to the emperor, told Reuters in an interview.

Ultimately, Akihito had his way after private negotiations with government officials.

"I think of the sufferings your people underwent during this unfortunate period, which was brought about by my country, and cannot but feel the deepest regret," he said at a banquet for Roh.

Reign

The early years of Akihito's reign saw a flourishing of debate over Japan's responsibility for World War Two and a series of government apologies.

The statements, and efforts to teach children about Japan's wartime actions, sparked a conservative backlash against a view of history seen as undermining national pride and identity.

In 1992, Akihito became the first modern Japanese monarch to visit China. Domestic right-wing groups opposed the trip, while Chinese activists demanded an apology. While in China, the emperor said he felt "deep sorrow" for the suffering Japan inflicted on the Chinese people.

The next year, he began visits to wartime sites, beginning in Okinawa, where resentment lingered against mainland Japan over the islanders' wartime sacrifices.

Six decades after the war's end, he visited Saipan, a US territory, on his first trip to a foreign battleground.

"He had felt strongly that he wanted to pray for all the souls who died in the war, not just domestically but overseas, not just Japanese but all the people of the world," Haketa said.

"Usually, the emperor's overseas trips are in response to requests by the government, but this trip was based on his strong personal desire," he added.

Despite Akihito's age and health problems - he has had heart surgery and been treated for prostate cancer - he has continued his travels.

In 2015 he and Michiko went to Palau's tiny Peleliu island, site of a fierce battle in 1944. In 2016 they visited the Philippines and this year returned to Okinawa.

On the 70th anniversary of Japan's defeat, Akihito expressed "deep remorse" over the war, a nuanced departure from his annual script.



Indonesian men carry the body of a victim of last week's earthquake during a burial in Gangga, Lombok Island, Indonesia on Aug 12. Hundreds of people were killed while nearly 400,000 people are left homeless or displaced after the powerful earthquake rocked the popular tourist island on Aug 5. (AP)

China

Mahathir aims to scrap China deals

No detention of Uighurs: China

GENEVA, Aug 13, (Agencies): China rejected on Monday allegations raised by a UN panel that 1 million Uighurs may be held in internment camps in the restive Xinjiang region, but said that some people underwent re-education after being deceived by extremists.

Hu Lianhe, deputy director general of the United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee, said that authorities in the far western Xinjiang region protected the full rights of all citizens equally.

China says that Xinjiang faces a serious threat from Islamist militants and separatists who plot attacks and stir up tensions between the mostly Muslim Uighur minority who call the region home and the ethnic Han Chinese majority.

"The argument that 1 million are detained in re-education centres is completely untrue," Hu told the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on the second day of its regular review of China's record.

"On freedom of religious belief, Xinjiang guarantees citizens freedom of religious belief and protects normal religious activities," he said.

"Those deceived by religious extremism ... shall be assisted by resettlement and re-education," he added.

Gay McDougall, a panel member, said on Friday it had received many credible reports that 1 million ethnic Uighurs in China are held in what resembles a "massive internment camp that is shrouded in secrecy, a sort of no rights zone".

"To say that they don't violate rights of minorities does not prove anything. We have to more than a denial of allegations," she told the Chinese delegation on Monday.

"I notice that you didn't quite deny that these re-education or indoctrination programmes don't take place," she added, seeking clarification on how many people undergo re-education.

Hu said China has clamped down on "extremist and terrorist crimes" in Xin-

jiang in accordance with the law, saying that there had been assassinations, explosions and poisonings there.

But, he said, it did not target any particular ethnic minority or seek "de-Islamisation" of the region.

Earlier on Monday, in the country's first response to the UN criticism, a state-run newspaper said that massively stepped-up security in Xinjiang has helped prevent "great tragedy".

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A Chinese court has begun proceedings against leading members of the banned religious group "Almighty God", state media reported, the latest crackdown on what the government has labelled a dangerous cult.

China has already sentenced dozens of followers of Quannengshen, or the Church of Almighty God, since the murder of a woman at a fastfood restaurant by suspected members of the group in 2014 sparked a national outcry.

In the latest case, an unspecified number of members of the group have been on trial in the northeastern province of Heilongjiang since July 31, state news agency Xinhua said late on Sunday.

"Heilongjiang police arrested the leader and some key members of the cult branch in northeast China in June 2017," the report said, citing local police.

It provided no other details of the case and it was not possible to reach a representative of the group in China for comment.

The group, which originated in central Henan province, believes that Jesus was resurrected as Yang Xiangbin, wife of the sect's founder, Zhao Weishan, Xinhua said. Zhao is also known as Xu Wenshan, Xinhua said, adding that the couple fled to the United States in 2000.

The group mainly recruits less-educated women who have family problems, and "lures" them in with normal Christian teachings, the report said.

"In the beginning new recruits were not forced to donate or attend the gatherings but after becoming a convert they were manipulated to leave their family and devote everything to the cult," it quoted an anonymous Heilongjiang police officer as saying.

Members are banned from using mobile phones, watching television or reading non-religious books and are made to "watch videos made for brainwashing", Xinhua added.

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Malaysia is looking to cancel multi-billion-dollar Chinese-backed infrastructure projects signed by the previous scandal-tainted government as it digs itself out of debt, Malaysia's prime minister said Monday during an extensive interview in which he also blasted Myanmar's treatment of Rohingya Muslims as "grossly unjust".

Mahathir Mohamad, at 93 the world's oldest prime minister, spoke with The Associated Press days before he heads to Beijing for his first visit since returning to power in a stunning electoral upset three months ago.

Mahathir said he wants to maintain good relations with China and welcomes its investment, so long as the projects benefit Malaysia. But he took his toughest stance yet on Chinese-backed energy pipelines and a rail project along peninsular Malaysia's eastern coast that were struck by his predecessor, Najib Razak.

The former prime minister, who remains in parliament but is barred from leaving the country, faces trial on multiple charges related to the alleged multimillion-dollar looting of the IMDB state investment fund. He denies wrongdoing.

"We don't think we need those two projects. We don't think they are viable. So if we can, we would like to just drop the projects," he said from his office in the administrative center of Putrajaya.

"We will review the cause of the incident to prevent a similar situation from happening again," he said.

There have been nine hospital fires in Taiwan in the past decade claiming 37 lives.

The worst was in 2012 when a cancer patient set a fire in a nursing facility in southern Tainan city that killed 13 people and injured 60 others. The arsonist was sentenced to death. (AFP)

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Duterte sacks 20: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has fired 20 people, including colonels and a general, over accusations of fraud and graft in purchases of military medical supplies, his spokesman said on Monday, the latest step in a sweeping battle on graft.

Reining in government corruption was a key election plank for Duterte, who has been a big supporter of the security forces, promising equipment and boosting their budget and salaries to help tackle crime, drugs and armed rebellions.

Those sacked were accused of involvement in 17 cases of bogus purchases of supplies, drugs and equipment at inflated prices, the spokesman, Harry Roque, told reporters.

Civilians and military officials were among those sacked. The servicemen faced court martial, he added.

Duterte was "personally aggravated and angered", having recently ordered that 50 million pesos (\$936,908) be made available to the main military hospital where the offences took place, Roque said.

Military chief Carlito Galvez said he was angered to learn that men in uniform had profited by inflating the prices of prosthetics bought for soldiers who had lost limbs in battle. (RTRS)



South Korean Unification Minister Cho Myoung-gyon (left), shakes hands with his North Korean counterpart Ri Son Gwon before leaving for South Korea after their meeting at the northern side of Panmunjom in the Demilitarized Zone, North Korea on Aug 13. The rival Koreas announced Monday that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in will meet in Pyongyang sometime in September. (AP)



Kim



Moon

Asia

Koreas plan third summit: North and South Korea agreed on Monday to hold a summit in the North in September, another step towards boosting cooperation between the old rivals, even as doubts grow over efforts to end the North's nuclear weapons programme.

Officials from both sides meeting in the truce village of Panmunjom, in the demilitarised zone (DMZ) that separates the two Koreas, reached an agreement on a September summit between the countries' leaders in the North's capital of Pyongyang.

No date was announced for what will be the third meeting this year between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

They first met in April in Panmunjom, a remarkable thaw in ties after more than a year of rising tension and fears of war over the North's development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

There they agreed that Moon would visit the North's capital in the autumn, though the pair met again in May in an unannounced meeting at Panmunjom.

No details on an agenda for next month's talks were announced, but the two Koreas have been discussing a range of issues, from a possible peace declaration to joint economic and infrastructure projects.

The progress between the two Koreas comes as North Korea and the United States are struggling to agree on how to bring about the North's denuclearisation, after Kim vowed to work toward that goal at a landmark summit in June in Singapore with US President Donald Trump. (RTRS)

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9 killed in Taiwan blaze: Nine people were killed and 30 injured in a blaze that broke out early Monday at a hospice for the terminally ill near Taiwan's capital Taipei, fire officials said.

All of the 44 people inside, including 33 patients, were evacuated after the fire started at the hospice on the seventh floor of a nine-storey government hospital in New Taipei city.

Sixteen patients had cardiac arrests and seven were revived.

The other nine died with the cause of death given as smoke inhalation, according to the local fire department.

New Taipei fire department official Hung Liang-chien told reporters an initial probe showed that the fire was likely caused by the short circuit of an electrical device.

"We are clarifying whether it's the power cable of the hospital's electric bed or an air

cushion bed brought in by relatives" of a patient, he said.

One caregiver working in the hospice reported seeing a spark on the bed where the fire started, according to local media.

Local fire chief Huang Te-ching earlier denied reports the sprinkler system had malfunctioned.

"The sprinkler device was on but there's some distance between its location and where the fire started so the fire couldn't be immediately put out," he told reporters.

He added that authorities were also exam-

ining why there was a nine minute delay by the hospital in reporting the fire.

CCTV footage on local media showed staff rushing through the hospice corridors, carrying patients out in their arms or in wheelchairs to evacuate them after the fire broke out.

The injured were rushed to several nearby hospitals, with 11 listed as in serious condition.

Premier William Lai apologised to the public and gave his condolences over the tragedy.



In this image from a video, patients stay outside the Taipei Hospital of the Ministry of Health and Welfare in New Taipei City, Taiwan following a fire on Aug 13. The fire broke out in the early hours of Monday morning, killing several people. (AP)