

## World News Roundup

## Philippines

## End to 69-yr treaty alliance

## Philippines notifies US of intent to 'terminate' VFA

MANILA, Feb 11, (AP): The Philippines notified the United States on Tuesday it would end a major security pact allowing American forces to train in the country, in the most serious threat under President **Rodrigo Duterte** to their 69-year treaty alliance.

Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. said in a tweet that Manila's notice of termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement was received by the deputy chief of mission at the US Embassy in Manila. The termination would take effect after 180 days unless both sides agree to keep it.

Locsin signed the notice on the order of Duterte, who has often criticized US security policies while praising those of China and Russia despite the Philippine military's close historic ties with its American counterpart.



Duterte

The US Embassy in Manila acknowledged receipt of Manila's notice and said Washington "will carefully consider how best to move forward to advance our shared interests."

"This is a serious step with significant implications for the US-Philippines alliance," the embassy said in a statement. "Our two countries enjoy a warm relationship, deeply rooted in history. We remain committed to the friendship between our two peoples."

In a Senate hearing last week, Locsin warned that abrogating the 1998 security accord with Washington would undermine Philippine security and foster aggression in the disputed South China Sea. US military presence in the strategic waterway has been seen as a crucial counterweight to China, which claims virtually the entire sea.

## Agreement

Locsin proposed a review of the agreement to fix contentious issues, including criminal jurisdiction over erring American troops, instead of abrogating it. Philippine defense and military officials did not immediately issue any reaction to the government move.

Duterte threatened to terminate the security agreement after Washington reportedly canceled the US visa of a loyal ally, Sen. Ronald dela Rosa, who was linked to human rights violations when he first enforced the president's deadly anti-drug crackdown as the national police chief in 2016.

Thousands of mostly poor suspects have been killed under the bloody campaign Duterte launched when he took office in mid-2016, alarming the US and other Western governments and human rights watchdogs.

Duterte gave the US a month to restore dela Rosa's visa, but US officials have not publicly reacted to the Philippine leader's demand.

Duterte said in a speech late Monday that President Donald Trump has moved to save the agreement but added that he rejected the idea. He accused the US of meddling in Philippine affairs, including seeking the release of opposition Sen. Leila de Lima, whom he has accused of involvement in illegal drugs. She has dismissed the allegation as a fabricated charge meant to muzzle dissent.

"America is very rude. They are so rude," Duterte said. Locsin outlined in the Senate hearing what he said were the crucial security, trade and economic benefits the accord provides. The US is a longtime treaty ally, a major trading partner and the largest development aid provider to the Philippines.

The accord, known by its acronym VFA, legally allows the entry of large numbers of American forces along with US military ships and aircraft for joint training with Filipino troops. It specifies which country will have jurisdiction over American soldiers, who may be accused of crimes while in the Philippines, a sensitive issue in the former American colony.

A separate defense pact subsequently signed by the allies in 2014, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, allows the extended stay of US forces and authorizes them to build and maintain barracks and warehouses and store defense equipment and weapons inside five designated Philippine military camps.

A Filipino senator and former national police chief, Panfilo Lacson, said terminating the treaty would reduce the two allies' 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty "to a mere paper treaty as far as the US is concerned."

Some Philippine senators have said the government decision to terminate the treaty, which the Senate ratified, should have the chamber's consent.

US State Department Assistant Secretary R. Clarke Cooper said in a telephone news conference Monday that abrogating the pact would put at risk more than 300 military engagements, including joint trainings, this year between the allies.

## Freedom

"All the engagements, all the freedom of navigation operations, all the exercises, all the joint training, having US military personnel in port, on the ground, on the flight line, does require that we have a mechanism that allows that," he said. "That's why the VFA is so important."

Terminating the VFA would affect the joint exercises and other activities with US forces "which the Philippine military and law enforcement agencies need to enhance their capabilities in countering threats to national security," Locsin said.

The US provided more than \$550 million in security assistance to the Philippines from 2016 to 2019, Locsin said, adding that there may be a "chilling effect on our economic relations" if the Philippines draws down its security alliance with Washington.

American forces have provided intelligence, training and aid that allowed the Philippines to deal with human trafficking, cyberattacks, illegal narcotics and terrorism, Locsin said, citing how US military assistance helped Filipino forces quell a disastrous siege by Islamic State group-aligned militants in southern Marawi city in 2017.

US military presence in the South China Sea has also been a deterrent to aggressive actions in the disputed waters, Locsin said.

China, the Philippines, Vietnam and three other governments have rival claims in the strategic waterway.

Duterte first threatened to abrogate the VFA in late 2016 after a US aid agency put on hold funds for anti-poverty projects in the Philippines. He has walked back on such threats but his government's action on Tuesday is the most serious indication of his intent to set back military ties with the US.

Aside from threatening to end the VFA, Duterte has said he will ban some critical US senators from entering the Philippines.

Duterte has also barred Cabinet officials from traveling to the US and turned down an invitation by Trump to join a special meeting the US leader will host for leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in March in Las Vegas.



US President Donald Trump watches as a US Army carry team moves a transfer case containing the remains of Sgt 1st Class Antonio Rodriguez, of Las Cruces, New Mexico on Feb 10 at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware. According to the Department of Defense both Rodriguez and Sgt 1st Class Javier Gutierrez, of San Antonio, Texas, died on Feb 8, during combat operations in Afghanistan. (AP)

## Thailand

## 'Level of control over base's armory woefully insufficient'

## Soldier's rampage reveals security lapses

NAKHON RATCHASIMA, Thailand, Feb 11, (AP): As this Thai city mourns the 29 people killed in a weekend shooting rampage, many are questioning the apparent security lapses that allowed him to steal the weapons he used in the assault.

It's still unclear how the gunman, identified as Sgt Maj Jakrapanth Thomma, snatched three assault rifles and two machine guns from the base and escaped in a stolen military vehicle.

A junior officer at the base who said he often acquired ammunition from Jakrapanth's unit for his own unit's target practice said the shooter would have had to overpower soldiers guarding small armory depots to take the weapons and ammunition. The officer asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to speak to reporters.

The gunman's actions show "that the level of control over this base's armory was woefully insufficient in terms of manpower and access restriction," said Michael Picard, research director of GunPolicy.org.

After stealing the weapons, the gunman then headed for a shopping mall, firing along the way. He held off security forces for almost 16 hours while holed up in the shopping center.

Questions about military security carry a special sting in Thailand because just a few weeks ago the country's tough-talking army commander said in an interview that he had ordered all army units to take care of their weaponry.

The Bangkok Post quoted Gen Apirat Kongsompong as saying that "all weapons must be kept under good care and ready for use." He stressed that the army "will never let ill-minded people steal them," referring to political opponents of the current government, led by former army commander Prayuth Chan-ocha.

On Tuesday, Apirat was due to address criticism of the operation at army headquarters in Bangkok.

In many past cases, guns have been

quietly siphoned off by corrupt officials from police and army facilities.

The most disastrous weapons theft took place in Thailand's deep south in 2004, when Muslim separatist militants raided an army base, killed four soldiers and made off with about 400 assault rifles. Some of the weapons are believed to have been sent to Muslim militants in Indonesia's Aceh province, but most stayed with the Thai rebels, who have waged an insurgency that has claimed about 7,000 lives.

Wanwichit Boonprong, a professor at Thailand's Rangsit University who specializes in the country's military, said more controls were needed on weapons on military bases.

"The safety system in the buildings where they keep weapons are obsolete. They just lock the room with padlocks," he said. "With this kind of system, once someone gets in, he can easily grab a weapon."

## Restricted

Access to the main gate to Jakrapanth's military unit, the 22nd Ammunition Battalion, was restricted on Monday, but much of the rest of the sprawling base in rural Nakhon Ratchasima province was open to through traffic.

Some people have criticized the many hours it took for Thai security forces to end the siege at the mall, among them Khunpol Khanpakwan, who was outside a public hospital morgue Monday waiting to recover his daughter's body.

His daughter, Apiksana Khanpakwan, 45, was killed and her 17-year-old daughter wounded when special forces fatally shot the gunman.

Though Prime Minister Prayuth has said that security forces did not kill anyone, Khanpakwan said he was still awaiting his daughter's autopsy report to determine the source of the many shots that rattled her body.

Khanpakwan wondered how a force that boasted of safeguarding its military hardware was unable to stop

a lone gunman from inflicting so much bloodshed.

"How could the authorities let a culprit run around killing people around the city? Just only one person," Khanpakwan said, adding that "they are equipped with weapons but couldn't do anything to him."

Anthony Davis, a security analyst who writes for the Jane's defense publications, said it was premature to judge the response to the siege.

"In the end, you have a professional military man with a large supply of ammunition holed up in a very large building with not much clear idea on the part of the security forces how many people are in his reach," Davis said.

"It took a long time, but in a big building they couldn't risk storming in and killing a lot of people," he said.

Other concerns linger about how the worst mass shooting in Thai history was handled, particularly lapses in security.

On the night of the siege, a police perimeter kept bystanders only 100 meters from the shooting, within earshot of the automatic gunfire exploding in sudden bursts from a position security forces struggled to pinpoint.

The following morning, Thai special forces enlisted the help of a drone operator for a local TV news channel to locate the gunman. Camouflaged soldiers covered the 28-year-old man on all sides as they escorted him into the mall's basement, where authorities believed the gunman was hiding.

From there, the reporter maneuvered his thermal-sensing drone through shattered windows and into a supermarket's cold storage room, broadcasting images of Jakrapanth and several apparent hostages back to police.

"That's when the sharpshooters' rain of fire at the gunman began and the rampage ended.

On Sunday evening, less than 10 hours later, a foreign reporter was able to walk into the mall through an unlocked door that was not behind police tape.



Incumbent Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, waves at Aam Aadmi Party, or 'common man's' party headquarters as they celebrate the party's victory in New Delhi, India on Feb 11. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist party was facing a stunning defeat by a regional party Tuesday in elections in the national capital that were seen as a referendum on Modi's policies such as a new national citizenship law that excludes Muslims. (AP)



Modi



Trump

## Subcontinent

**Modi's party sees likely defeat:** Indian Prime Minister **Narendra Modi's** Hindu nationalist party was facing a stunning defeat by a regional party Tuesday in elections in the national capital that were seen as a referendum on Modi's policies such as a new national citizenship law that excludes Muslims.

Saturday's New Delhi legislative elections pit Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party against the incumbent Aam Aadmi Party, or "common man's" party, whose pro-poor policies focused on fixing state-run schools and providing cheap electricity, free health care and bus transport for women during its five years in power.

Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah appealed to majority Hindus by focusing on national issues such as the citizenship law, which triggered widespread protests, at the expense of problems facing the capital's millions of residents.

With more than 75% of the votes counted, the Aam Aadmi Party, or AAP, was leading in 63 of the 70 constituencies and the BJP in seven, the Election Commission said. The Congress party, led by Sonia Gandhi, was unlikely to win any seats.

Full results were expected later Tuesday. A defeat is a setback to Modi's prestige, coming less than eight months after he led the BJP to a resounding victory in national elections. The party won all seven of the capital's parliamentary seats in those polls.

The victory will be a major boost for AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal, the 51-year-old incumbent New Delhi chief minister and anti-corruption crusader.

Kejriwal joined hundreds of his supporters in celebrating the party's performance. In a brief speech, he said the election "has given birth to a new brand of politics — politics of development" meeting people's basic needs.

There was no immediate reaction from the BJP's top leadership.

Kejriwal launched his party in 2012 and campaigned to rid the Indian political system and government of corruption and inefficiency.

The party's symbol — a broom — and its promise to sweep the administration of graft struck a chord with New Delhi nearly 20 million people.

In the 2015 elections, Kejriwal's party won 67 seats and the BJP three.

Modi and Home Minister Shah cam-

paigned vigorously in an attempt to unseat the AAP and capture power in New Delhi. The BJP last ruled New Delhi in the 1990s. (AP)

**Rohingya boat capsizes, 16 dead:** An overcrowded boat carrying about 125 Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh camps sank Tuesday off St Martin's Island in the Bay of Bengal, leaving at least 16 refugees dead, a Bangladesh official said.

Noor Ahmed, the top elected official on the island, told The Associated Press by phone from the scene that the coast guard and other rescuers recovered the bodies of 14 women, one child and a man after the wooden boat capsized early in the day.

Those on the boat were hoping to reach Malaysia illegally and were being aided by traffickers, Ahmed said, quoting accounts by the survivors.

He said about 62 refugees either swam to the shore or were saved by the rescuers. (AP)



Rescuers cover the bodies of victims of a boat capsizing at St Martin's Island, Bangladesh on Feb 11. An overcrowded boat carrying about 125 Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh camps sank early Tuesday in the Bay of Bengal, leaving at least 16 dead, Bangladesh officials said Tuesday. The coast guard, navy divers and other rescuers recovered the bodies of more than a dozen people after the wooden boat capsized off St Martin's Island, the top elected official on the island told The Associated Press. (AP)

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**Trump pays tribute to 2 soldiers:** US President **Donald Trump** traveled Monday to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware to pay respects to two US soldiers killed Saturday in Afghanistan when a soldier dressed in an Afghan army uniform opened fire with a machine gun.

The Defense Department identified the dead American soldiers as Sgt Javier Jaguar Gutierrez, 28, and Sgt Antonio Rey Rodriguez, 28. Six other American soldiers were wounded in the attack.

Trump saluted and Vice-President Mike Pence placed his hand over his heart as transfer cases containing the remains were carried out of a C-17 military plane and transferred to a transport vehicle.

As Trump and Pence stood on the tarmac in a falling mist, a woman among the mourners broke free of efforts to hold her back and ran toward the plane. She threw herself on its ramp, crying and screaming, as mourners and an official tried to restrain her. She waived as the doors on the transfer vehicle closed.

Trump and Pence, who had traveled from a rally in New Hampshire, also met with the families before taking part in what is known in the military as a "dignified transfer." (AP)