

## Taiwan alleges China deploying largest naval fleet in decades

TAIPEI: (news desk) China is deploying its largest navy fleet in regional waters in nearly three decades, posing a threat to Taiwan that is more pronounced than previous Chinese war games, the Taiwanese defence ministry alleged on Tuesday.

Speaking in Taipei, defence ministry spokesperson Sun Li-fang said the scale of the current Chinese naval deployment in an area running from the southern Japanese islands down into the South China Sea was the largest since China held war games around Taiwan ahead of 1996 Taiwanese presidential elections.

China's military has yet to comment and has not confirmed it is carrying out any exercises.

"The current scale is the largest compared to the previous four," Sun said. "Regardless of whether they have announced drills, they are posing a great threat to us," according to the spokesperson. Senior ministry intelligence officer Hsieh Jih-sheng told the same press conference there have so far been no live fire drills in China's seven "reserved" air space zones, two of which are in the Taiwan Strait, but there had been a significant increase in Chinese activity to the north of Taiwan over the last day.

The number of China navy and coast guard ships in the region, which a Taiwan security source said remained at around 90, was "very alarming", and China was taking aim at other countries in the region and not only Taiwan, he alleged.

## South Korea slaps travel bans on more top officials

SEOUL: (news desk) South Korean authorities banned more top officials from leaving the country on Tuesday, in the wake of President Yoon Suk Yeol's bungled attempt to impose martial law.

A day after Yoon himself was hit with a travel ban, his party was meanwhile forging a "resignation roadmap" that reportedly could see him step down in February or March before fresh elections, while the opposition plans to organise an impeachment vote every Saturday. Yoon suspended civilian rule a week ago and sent special forces and helicopters to parliament, before lawmakers forced him to rescind the decree in a country assumed to be a stable democracy.

Investigators are probing the president and a cabal of allies — many from the same school — for alleged insurrection over the sequence of extraordinary events.

On Tuesday Cho Ji-ho, commissioner general of the Korean National Police Agency, and two other top police officials became the latest to be barred from foreign travel, police said.

Already under a travel ban are the former defence and interior ministers and martial law commander General Park An-su, who along with other top brass was grilled by lawmakers on Tuesday.

## Netanyahu testifies for first time in corruption trial

TEL AVIV: (news desk) Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took the witness stand for the first time on Tuesday in his long-running corruption trial, saying he was being hounded for his hawkish security policies. Netanyahu, 75, is Israel's first sitting prime minister to be charged with a crime. He is testifying at the same time Israel is engaged in a conflict in Gaza and facing possible new threats posed by regional turmoil, including in Syria.

Last week judges ruled that Netanyahu, indicted in 2019, must testify three times a week, forcing the long-time Israeli leader to juggle between the courtroom and the war room at Israel's Defence Ministry, minutes away from the courthouse.

He took the stand for about four hours and will resume testifying on Wednesday. Twice his military secretary handed him written messages, the first time requiring a recess and underscoring his having to do double duty as prime minister. The leader of the right-wing Likud party, Netanyahu assailed the Israeli media for what he called its leftist stance and accused journalists of having hounded him for years because his policies did not align with a push for a Palestinian state.

"I have been waiting for eight years for this moment to tell the truth," Netanyahu told the three-judge court. But I am also a prime minister ... I am leading the country through a seven-front war. And I think the two can be done in parallel."

Netanyahu was indicted in three cases involving gifts from millionaire friends and for allegedly seeking regulatory favours for media tycoons in return for favourable news coverage. He denies any wrongdoing and has pleaded not guilty.



NABIL Mouhamed Nfonrifoum Mbombo Njoya, (second left), King of the Bamoun, talks to legislators during a ritual ceremony in Fouban.

## Trial of a king: ancient royal ritual in Cameroon promotes peace

FOUMBAN: (News desk) Chatter muffled as members of a secret society, masked and garbed in honey-coloured robes, entered the court of Fouban, the historic capital of a centuries-old kingdom nestled in hilly northwestern Cameroon.

The 20th king of the Bamoun people, Mouhammad Nabil Mfour-

foum Mbombo Njoya, stood up from his ornate throne — a replica of the original, now at a German museum — for the ancient ritual to get under way. The nearly 600-year-old tradition sees him put on public trial over his governance — with local chiefs reading out indictments destined to put his popularity to the test. The tradition is part of

a set of rituals taking place over a week in a bid to promote dialogue, harmony and peace. The ceremony is a first for Mbombo Njoya, 31, who took over the throne after his father died in 2021. If deemed to have failed, the monarch could be fined or removed from office. But if he succeeds, he is granted a new mandate and allegiance.

Tourists and officials last week flocked to the remote, grassy region of the West African country to attend Nguon, a set of royal rituals that date back to 1384, when the kingdom was founded. The rites, which are followed by celebrations, had not taken place in six years due to the Covid-19 pandemic and other factors.

## Fierce strikes leave 176 dead in Sudan

PORT SUDAN: (news desk) At least 176 people were killed in two days of army and paramilitary strikes across Sudan, according to tolls provided by officials, activists and lawyers on Tuesday.

In Omdurman, part of the Sudanese capital, paramilitary shelling killed at least 65 people and wounded hundreds on Tuesday, according to the state's army-aligned governor. A single shell on a passenger bus "killed everyone

on board and turned 22 people into body parts", said Khartoum governor Ahmed Othman Hamza. He attributed the strike to "the terrorist militia", in reference to the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, at war with the army since April 2023. The attack comes a day after an army air strike on a market in the North Darfur town of Kabkabiya killed over 100 people, the pro-democracy Emergency Lawyers reported on Tuesday. "The

air strike took place on the town's weekly market day, where residents from various nearby villages had gathered to shop, resulting in the death of more than 100 people and injury of hundreds, including women and children," said the lawyers' group, which has been documenting human rights abuses during the conflict. The lawyers also reported six people were killed in North Kordofan state when a drone that had

crashed on Nov 26 exploded. In the famine-stricken Zamzam displacement camp in North Darfur, paramilitary shelling on Tuesday killed five people, according to civil society group the Darfur General Coordination of Camps for the Displaced and Refugees. A UN-backed report in July declared famine had taken hold in the camp after a month-long RSF siege of state capital El-Fasher and the surrounding area.



People walk past a destroyed vehicle, following shelling by the Rapid Support Forces, in Omdurman, Sudan.

## A-bomb survivors call for a world without nukes

OSLO: (news desk) Japan's atomic bomb survivors' group Nihon Hidankyo accepted its Nobel Peace Prize on Tuesday, pleading for the abolition of nuclear weapons that are resurging as a threat 80 years after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. One of the three Nihon Hidankyo co-chairs, 92-year-old Nagasaki survivor Terumi Tanaka, demanded "action from

governments to achieve" a nuclear-free world. The prize was presented at a time when countries like Russia — which has the world's largest nuclear arsenal — increasingly brandish the atomic threat. "I am infinitely saddened and angered that the 'nuclear taboo' threatens to be broken," Tanaka told dignitaries at Oslo's City Hall, some clad in traditional

Norwegian bunads or Japanese kimonos. Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly made nuclear threats as he presses the war in Ukraine. He signed a decree in November lowering the threshold for using atomic weapons. In a strike on the Ukrainian city of Dnipro a few days later, the Russian army fired a new hypersonic missile capable of carrying a nuclear

warhead, although in this instance it had a regular payload. Nihon Hidankyo works to rid the planet of the weapons of mass destruction, relying on testimonies from survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, known as "hibakusha". The US bombings of the Japanese cities on Aug 6 and 9, 1945 killed 214,000 people, leading to Japan's surrender in World War II.

## Trump told Trudeau 'Canada should become 51st US state'

WASHINGTON: (News desk) US president-elect Donald Trump on Tuesday mocked Canada's Justin Trudeau as the "governor" of a state, rather than prime minister of the giant US neighbour. According to Fox News, Trump suggested making Canada the 51st US state during discussions with Trudeau in Florida, which followed threats to impose huge trade tariffs when he takes office in January. The report from Fox News said Trump told Trudeau that if Canada could not withstand his threatened 25 percent tariff on all Canadian imports, then it should be absorbed into the United States. The idea has long been joked about and Trump has a habit of provocative statements, especially on social media, that can be read as jokes or bluster. During his first term, Trump repeatedly discussed buying Greenland from Denmark. "It was a pleasure to have dinner the other night with Governor Justin Trudeau of the Great State of Canada," posted Trump on his Truth Social platform shortly after midnight. "I look forward to seeing the Governor again soon so that we may continue our in depth talks on Tariffs and Trade, the results of which will be truly spectacular for all!" "Why are we subsidising these countries?" Trump said in a televised interview that aired Sunday, referring to Mexico and Canada. "If we're going to subsidize them, let them become a state," he told NBC. Publicly, Trump and Trudeau said their meeting at the president-elect's Mar-a-Lago estate went well.

## Assad's feared dungeons give up their secrets

DAMASCUS: (news desk) Syrians lived in terror for decades of what went on behind the concrete walls of Damascus's security compound. Now the Assad dynasty has been toppled, its dungeons and torture chambers are giving up their secrets.

Rebel fighters stand guard at the entrances to the forbidden city in the capital's Kafr Sousa district, where the feared security services had their headquarters alongside government offices. The myriad of different agencies which kept tabs on the lives of ordinary Syrians each operated their own underground prisons and interrogation chambers inside the walled defence ministry compound. Syrians lived in fear of being summoned for a round of questioning from which they might never return. Agency found first responder Sleiman Kahwaji wandering around the complex this week trying to locate the building where he was questioned and then detained. He said he was still at secondary school when he was arrested in 2014 on suspicion of "terrorism", a frequent allegation under the rule of now toppled president Bashar al-Assad, who brooked no dissent.

## Trump hush money case must stand despite election win: prosecutors

NEW YORK: (news desk) Donald Trump's criminal conviction on charges stemming from hush money paid to an adult film star must stand despite his victory in the Nov 5 US presidential election, prosecutors said in urging a judge to deny his bid to dismiss the case. In a court filing made public on Tuesday, prosecutors with Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg's office said Trump should receive "temporary accommodations" to make sure the case does not interfere with his presidency, but called wiping out the jury's verdict an "extreme remedy".

"President-elect immunity does not exist," prosecutors wrote. "The overwhelming evidence of defendant's guilt and the critical importance of preserving public confidence in the criminal justice system, among many other factors, weigh heavily against dismissal."

Justice Juan Merchan has not said when he will rule on Trump's bid to dismiss the charges. In urging the judge to vacate the guilty verdict and toss the charges, Trump's lawyers last week said having the case hang over him after he takes office on Jan 20 would improperly impede his ability to govern.

## Asma Assad: London-born first lady not welcome in UK

LONDON: (news desk) Once celebrated as an advocate of women's rights in the Middle East, British-born former first lady Asma al-Assad has fled into exile with her husband, with UK officials saying she is not welcome to return to London. Asma al-Assad, 49, her husband and three children have sought refuge in Moscow after rebels ousted Bashar al-Assad from power, according to Russian state news agencies, although the Kremlin has not confirmed the reports.

It is just the latest blow to the shredded reputation of a woman whose glamour and charm had been seen in the past as a key asset to the Syrian government. Asma al-Assad was born in London in 1975 and has spent half her life in the UK, with her parents still living in the west of the capital city.

She retains British citizenship, but foreign minister David Lammy said on Monday that she was no longer welcome in the country, suggesting she may soon lose her UK passport.

"I've seen mentioned in the last few days, Asma Assad (is) potentially someone with UK citizenship that might attempt to come into our country, and I want it confirmed that she's a sanctioned individual and is not welcome here in the UK," he told parliament.

Asma al-Assad had her UK assets frozen in March 2012 amid growing protests against her husband's rule, as part of a European sanction programme that London maintained after Brexit.

## Arctic is now emitting more carbon than it absorbs

WASHINGTON: (news desk) After locking carbon dioxide in its frozen soil for millennia, the Arctic tundra is undergoing a dramatic transformation, driven by frequent wildfires that are turning it into a net source of carbon dioxide emissions, a US agency said Tuesday. This stark shift is detailed in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's 2024 Arctic Report Card, which revealed that annual surface air temperatures in the Arctic this year were

the second-warmest on record since 1900. "Our observations now show that the Arctic tundra, which is experiencing warming and increased wildfire, is now emitting more carbon than it stores, which will worsen climate change impacts," said NOAA Administrator Rick Spinrad. The finding is based on average of observations recorded from 2001-2020. Climate warming exerts dual effects on the Arctic. While it stimulates plant productivity and

growth, which remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, it also leads to increased surface air temperatures that cause permafrost to thaw. Thawing permafrost releases carbon previously trapped in frozen soil as carbon dioxide and methane — two potent greenhouse gases — through microbial decomposition. In 2024, Alaska recorded its second-warmest permafrost temperatures on record, the report said. Human-caused climate change is also intensifying

high-latitude wildfires, which have increased in burned area, intensity, and associated carbon emissions. Wildfires not only combust vegetation and soil organic matter, releasing carbon into the atmosphere, but they also strip away insulating soil layers, accelerating long-term permafrost thaw and its associated carbon emissions. Since 2003, circumpolar wildfire emissions have averaged 207 million tons of carbon annually, ac-

ording to NOAA. At the same time, Arctic terrestrial ecosystems have remained a consistent source of methane. "Last year, 2023, was the largest fire year on record due to Canadian wildfires, which burned more than twice any other year on record in Canada," report co-author Brendan Rogers said during a press conference. The fires emitted nearly 400 million tons of carbon — more than two-and-a-half times the emissions from all other sectors in

Canada combined, he added. Meanwhile, 2024 ranked as the second-highest year for wildfire emissions within the Arctic Circle. 'Alarming harbinger' Asked whether the Arctic's shift from carbon sink to source might be permanent, Rogers said it remains an open question. While boreal forests further south still serve as carbon sinks, northern regions are of greater concern. "There is definitely interannual variability," he emphasised.