

Japan to buy more US-made stealth jets, radar to counter China, Russia

TOKYO: Japan will accelerate spending on advanced stealth fighters, long-range missiles and other equipment over the next five years to support U.S. forces facing China's military in the Western Pacific, two new government defense papers said.

A Marine Corps pilot prepares for a vertical landing of Lockheed Martin F-35B stealth fighter aboard the USS Wasp amphibious assault carrier during their operation in the waters off Japan's southernmost island of Okinawa March 23, 2018.

Kato/File Photo
The plans are the clearest indication yet of Japan's ambition to become a regional power as a military build-up by China and a resurgent Russia puts pressure on its U.S. ally.

"The United States remains the world's most powerful nation, but national rivalries are surfacing and we recognize the impor-

ance of the strategic competition with both China and Russia as they challenge the regional order," said a 10-year defense program outline approved by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government on Tuesday.

The United States, followed by China, North Korea and Russia, are the countries that most influenced Japan's latest military thinking, the paper said.

China, the world's second biggest economy, is deploying more ships and aircraft to patrol waters near Japan, while North Korea has yet to fulfill a pledge to dismantle its nuclear and missile programs.

In Beijing, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said Japan was "singing the same old tune" and making "thoughtless remarks" about China's normal defense activities.

"What Japan is doing here is neither conducive to improving

and developing China-Japan relations, nor to the broader picture of regional peace and stability," Hua told a news briefing.

"China expresses strong dissatisfaction and opposition at this and has already lodged stern representations with Japan," she added.

Russia, which continues to probe Japan's air defenses, said on Monday it built new barracks for its troops on islands seized from Japan at the end of World War Two.

Japan plans to buy 45 Lockheed Martin Corp (LMT.N) F-35 stealth fighters, worth about \$4 billion, in addition to the 42 jets already on order, according to a separate five-year procurement plan approved on Tuesday.

The new planes will include 18 short take off and vertical landing (STOVL) B variants of the F-35 that planners want to deploy on Japanese islands along the edge

of the East China Sea. The islands are part of a chain stretching past Taiwan and down to the Philippines that has marked the limit of Chinese military dominance east of the disputed South China Sea.

"Japan's decision to acquire more F-35s is a testament to the aircraft's transformational capability and its increasing role in promoting regional stability and enhancing the US-Japan security alliance," Lockheed Martin said in a statement.

The navy's two large helicopter carriers, the Izumo and Kaga, will be modified for F-35B operations, the paper said.

The 248-metre (814 ft) long Izumo-class ships are as big as any of Japan's aircraft carriers in World War Two. They will need reinforced decks to withstand the heat blast from F-35 engines and could be fitted with ramps to aid short take-offs, two defense min-

istry officials told Reuters.

The new F-35 order may also help Japan avert a trade war with the United States. Russia further fortifies islands claimed by Japan US President Donald Trump, who has threatened to impose tariffs on Japanese car imports, thanked Abe for buying the F-35s when the two met at a summit in Argentina this month.

Other U.S.-made equipment on Japan's shopping list includes two land-based Aegis Ashore air defense radars to defend against North Korean missiles, four Boeing Co (BA.N) KC-46 Pegasus refueling planes to extend the range of Japanese aircraft, and nine Northrop Grumman (NOC.N) E-2 Hawkeye early-warning planes.

Japan plans to spend 25.5 trillion yen (\$224.7 billion) on military equipment over the next five years, 6.4 percent higher than the previous five-year plan. Cost-cut-

ting will free up another 2 trillion yen for purchases, the procurement paper said.

Japan only spends about 1 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defense, but the size of its economy means it already has one of the world's largest militaries.

"The budget is increasing and there has been an acceleration to deploy capability as soon as possible," Robert Morrissey, head of Raytheon Co's (RTN.N) unit in Japan, said this month.

Wary of North Korean promises to abandon ballistic missile development, Japan's military is buying longer-range Raytheon SM-3 interceptor missiles able to strike enemy warheads in space.

The defense papers assessed non-traditional military threats as well. A new joint-forces cyber unit will bolster Japan's defenses against cyber attacks.

Another report adds: More

electronic warfare capabilities are planned, and the air force will get its first space unit to help keep tabs on potential adversaries high above the Earth's atmosphere.

A Kremlin-backed candidate is on track to be governor of a region on Russia's Pacific coast, initial voting results showed on Sunday, after an election process in which the opposition had threatened the Kremlin's usually tight grip on power.

Festive decorations and illumination lights for the upcoming New Year and Christmas season are on display near the Kremlin's Spasskaya Tower and St. Basil's Cathedral in central Moscow, Russia December 14, 2018.

Sunday's vote in Primorsky region, which includes the port city of Vladivostok, was a re-run of a Sept. 16 election in which a Communist Party challenger claimed he was the rightful winner over the Kremlin's nominee.—AFP

Violence against journalists hits unprecedented levels: RSF

PARIS: The murder of Saudi columnist Jamal Khashoggi in a year when more than half of all journalists killed were targeted deliberately reflects a hatred of the media in many areas of society, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said on Tuesday.

At least 63 professional journalists around the world were killed doing their jobs in 2018, RSF said, a 15 percent increase on last year. The number of fatalities rises to 80 when including all media workers and citizen journalists.

"The hatred of journalists that is voiced ... by unscrupulous politicians, religious leaders and businessmen has tragic consequences on the ground, and has been reflected in this disturbing increase in violations against journalists," RSF Secretary-General Christophe Deloire said in a statement.

Khashoggi, a royal insider who became a critic of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and began writing for the Washington Post after moving to the United States last year, was killed inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October.

Khashoggi's death sparked global outrage. Saudi officials have rejected accusations that the crown prince ordered his death.

The Paris-based body said that the three most dangerous countries for journalists to work in were Afghanistan, Syria and Mexico.

Meanwhile, the shooting of five employees of the Capital Gazette newspaper propelled the United States into the ranks of the most dangerous countries.

The media freedom organization said 348 journalists are being detained worldwide, compared with 326 at this time in 2017. China, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Egypt hold more than half the world's imprisoned journalists.

Another report adds: Ranil Wickremesinghe was sworn in as Sri Lanka's prime minister on Sunday, making a remarkable comeback weeks after being ousted by President Maithripala Sirisena under controversial circumstances.

Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe addresses his supporters and the party members after assuming duties in Colombo, Sri Lanka December 16, 2018. REUTERS/Stringer
Wickremesinghe's reinstatement, which is expected to end a political crisis that began in late October when he was surprisingly sacked, is an embarrassment for the president.

Sirisena had replaced Wickremesinghe with former president Mahinda Rajapaksa following differences over policy matters and other issues. However, Rajapaksa failed to win a parliamentary majority and resigned on Saturday as a government shutdown loomed.

Sirisena had repeatedly said he would not reappoint Wickremesinghe as prime minister. But he had to change his stance to gain parliamentary approval for a temporary budget that is required by Jan. 1.

"It is a victory for Sri Lanka's democratic institutions and the sovereignty of our citizens," Wickremesinghe said in a tweet. "I thank everyone who stood firm in defending the constitution and ensuring the triumph of democracy."

He later told his supporters at his official residence that he would ensure a "better economic situation, better standard of living" for Sri Lankans after first working to "normalize the country".

The swearing-in ceremony was closed to the media and only a few lawmakers from Wickremesinghe's coalition were present, an official in the president's office told Reuters. The official did not want to be named.

Wickremesinghe, who has never completed a full term as prime minister, was appointed for the post for the fifth time.

The South Asian island country's parliament had voted to cut the budget for Rajapaksa and his ministers after Sirisena refused to accept no-confidence votes against Rajapaksa, saying that due process was not followed.

Migrant family who fled tear gas at US border seeks asylum

TIJUANA: Members of a group of Honduran migrants, which included a mother who had been photographed running with her daughters from tear gas several weeks ago, began seeking asylum at the U.S. border with Mexico on Monday, according to a Reuters witness and lawyers for the group.

The group comprised mostly teens but also included Maria Meza and her children, the lawyers said. The family appeared in a widely circulated photograph taken by Reuters as they fled tear gas thrown by U.S. authorities during a protest at the border last month when some migrants rushed the U.S. fence.

Sandra Cordero, from advocacy group Families Belong Together, which accompanied the migrants, said eight unaccompanied minors were being processed for asylum. Meza and her family were also being processed, Cordero said.

A system dubbed "metering" limits how many can ask for asylum each day at U.S. ports of entry, leading to months-long waits in Mexico for thousands of migrants fleeing violence in Central America.

Sometimes U.S. border authorities allow individuals considered vulnerable, such as unaccompanied minors, to be processed more rapidly. Activists said the group on Monday fit that category.

Democratic U.S. Representatives Jimmy Gomez and Nanette Barragan, along with lawyers, accompanied the group at the Otay Mesa port of entry in Tijuana, Mexico, on Monday afternoon, the Reuters witness said. U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) agents had said the port of entry was full, Gomez said.

Surrounded by advocates and lawyers, the migrants sat by a metal turnstile.—AFP



TOKYO: A Marine Corps pilot prepares for a vertical landing of Lockheed Martin F-35B stealth fighter aboard the USS Wasp amphibious assault carrier during their operation in the waters off Japan's southernmost island of Okinawa.

China's Xi pledges 'unswerving' reforms, but on own terms



BEIJING: Chinese President Xi Jinping called on Tuesday for the unswerving implementation of reforms on Beijing's terms, saying no one could boss it around, but offered no new measures in a speech marking 40 years of market liberalization. In remarks lasting nearly an hour-and-a-half, Xi called for support for the state economy and development of the private sector, and said China would expand efforts at opening up and ensure the implementation of major reforms.

China's substantial support of its

sprawling state sector is a point of contention with the United States.

Xi was speaking amid mounting pressure to accelerate reforms and improve market access for foreign companies as a trade war with the United States weighs on the economy.

But he said China had to make its own decisions.

"There is no text book that can provide a golden rule, and there is no instructor who can boss around the Chinese people," Xi said at Beijing's Great Hall of the People.

Xi was speaking on the day China has marked the 40th anniversary of the start of late leader Deng Xiaoping's campaign of "reform and opening up", which led to explosive industrial growth that made China's economy the world's second-largest.

Chinese President Xi Jinping speaks at an event marking the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening up at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China December 18, 2018. e

"We must, unswervingly, reinforce the development of the state economy while, unswervingly, encouraging, supporting and guiding the development of the non-state economy," he said.

Xi reaffirmed the ruling Communist Party's leadership in all aspects of society and said reforms should be in line with the overall goal of improving the socialist system with Chinese characteristics.

"Opening brings progress while closure leads to backwardness," Xi said.

"Every step of reform and opening up is not easy. In future, we will be inevitably faced with all sorts of risks and challenges, and even unimaginable tempestuous storms," said Xi, stressing the role of the Communist Party.

But his remarks failed to excite investors. The Shanghai Composite index ended down 0.8 percent, while the blue-chip CSI300 index lost 1

percent, tracking broadly lower Asian shares.

"Despite promises of the importance of the speech, very little new was announced, particularly given its similarity to parts of Xi's speech at the Politburo meeting a few days prior," said Jonas Short, head of the Beijing office of brokerage Everbright Sun Hung Kai.

Short said attention would now focus on the Central Economic Work Conference expected later this week for clues on policy direction.

The trade war with the United States has spurred some entrepreneurs, government advisers and think-tanks to call for faster reforms and the freeing up of a private sector stifled by state controls and struggling to gain access to credit.

Russia further fortifies islands claimed by Japan

Xi and U.S. President Donald Trump agreed early this month to a 90-day truce in the trade dispute, which halted the threatened escalation of punitive tariffs while the two sides negotiate. William Zart, chairman of the American Chamber of Commerce in China, said there would be plenty of other opportunities for China to offer greater substance for a foreign audience. "We know that China doesn't want a trade war, so we are optimistic that real opening up can still take place before the 90-day window closes on March 1," Zart said in a statement.—Reuters

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Russia, Iran and Turkey seek deal on new Syria constitutional body

GENEVA: Russia, Iran and Turkey are close to agreement on composition of a Syrian constitutional committee that could pave the way for drafting a new charter followed by elections, diplomats said on Monday.

United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura meets with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on forming a constitutional committee in Syria at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, December 18, 2018.

The foreign ministers of the three nations, who support opposing sides in Syria's nearly eight-year war, meet for talks on Tuesday in Geneva, where they are expected to seek the United Nations' blessing for their joint proposal, they added. Staffan de Mistura, U.N. Special Envoy for Syria who steps down at year-end, has tried since January to clinch agreement on the identity of 150 members of a new constitutional committee to revitalize a dormant peace process.

President Bashar al-Assad's government and the opposition fighting to topple him have each submitted a list of 50 names, but the three nations have haggled over the final 50 members from civil society and "independent" members, diplomats say. "The three countries are coming with a proposal

for the third list, which has been the heart of the problem," said one diplomat.

Turkey and other nations would consider working with Assad if he won a democratic election, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Sunday, two days before coming to Geneva to meet Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov and Iran's Javad Zarif.

Turkey supports rebel fighters who control part of northwest Syria. A year ago, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan described Assad as a terrorist and said it was impossible for Syrian peace efforts to continue with him.

De Mistura said at the weekend the constitutional committee could be a starting point for political progress.

"It does touch, for instance, on presidential powers, it could and should be touching on how elections are done, on division of power, in other words a big issue," he said.

De Mistura will be under "heavy pressure" to accept the trio's proposal to complete the make-up of the constitutional body, but may leave the decision to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in New York later this week, the diplomats said.

"The last word is with us, with the U.N., not with any country, as good and as powerful as they may be," he said on Sunday.

Another report adds: Nearly 200 countries overcame political divisions late on Saturday to agree on rules for implementing a landmark global climate deal, but critics say it is not ambitious enough to prevent the dangerous effects of global warming. After two weeks of talks in the Polish city of Katowice, nations finally reached consensus on a more detailed framework for the 2015 Paris Agreement, which aims to limit a rise in average world temperatures to "well below" 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels. "It is not easy to find agreement on a deal so specific and technical. Through this package you have made a thousand little steps forward together. You can feel proud," Polish president of the talks Michal Kurtyka told delegates.

After he struck the gavel to signal agreement had been reached, ministers joined him on the stage, hugging and laughing in signs of relief after the marathon talks. Before the talks started, many expected the deal would not be as robust as needed. The unity which underpinned the Paris talks has fragmented, and U.S. President Donald Trump intends to pull his country - one of the world's biggest emitters - out of the pact. At the 11th hour, ministers managed to break a deadlock between Brazil and other countries over the accounting rules for the monitoring of carbon credits.—AFP

El Salvador court frees woman jailed under anti-abortion law

SAN SALVADOR: A Salvadoran woman accused of the attempted murder of her newborn baby under the country's strict abortion laws after she was raped by her stepfather was freed by a court on Monday after more than 18 months in jail.

Imelda Cortez, 20, gave birth in a latrine in April 2017 and left the baby there. When Cortez was treated at a hospital afterward, doctors suspected she had tried to perform an abortion.

The court determined that Cortez, who had not known she was pregnant, did not try to kill her infant daughter. The child survived.

As she left court, Cortez, who was arrested shortly after the birth, was greeted by cheering relatives and human rights activists holding signs demanding her freedom.

Cortez's stepfather has been arrested and is awaiting trial, Salvadoran prosecutors said.

For the past two decades, El Salvador has had some of the world's most severe laws against women who have abortions or those who are suspected of assisting them, even when the life of the woman is at risk.

Some 22 more women are serving sentences of up to 35 years for aggravated homicide linked to abortion, according to the Group for Decriminalizing Abortion.

"This sentence ... represents hope for women who are still in prison and are also being tried for aggravated homicide," defense lawyer Ana Martinez said.

President Salvador Sanchez Ceren in 2017 proposed a law to allow abortions in cases of rape or when the mother's life is at risk, but Congress did not pass it.—AFP

Malaysia airport VX poison trial suspended

KUALA LUMPUR: A Malaysian court on Tuesday suspended the trial of a woman accused of killing the half-brother of North Korea's leader as her lawyers sought more time to seek written statements from witnesses.

Indonesian Siti Aisyah, 26, is charged along with Doan Thi Huong, a 30-year-old Vietnamese, of poisoning Kim Jong Nam with liquid VX, a banned chemical weapon, at Kuala Lumpur airport in February 2017.

Siti Aisyah was originally set to take the stand in January, after the court ruled in August that prosecutors had successfully established a case against her and Huong.

But the trial judge on Tuesday ordered a stay to allow her lawyer to appeal a court decision not to compel prosecutors to turn over copies of statements made by seven witnesses.

Siti Aisyah's lawyer, Gooi Soon Seng, said the documents were vital to her case, as five of the witnesses had gone missing.

"Without the police statements, it would compromise my client's defense and be tantamount to a miscarriage of justice," Gooi told reporters.

The court set Dec. 21 to decide whether the trial would continue with Huong's defense or be postponed until Siti Aisyah's appeal has concluded. Defense lawyers have said the women thought they were playing pranks for a reality TV show and did not know they were poisoning Kim.—AFP

COURT NOTICE

In the court of Muhammad Nadeem Shaikat, Additional District Judge, Sheikhpura Suit for recovery Sui Northern Gas Pipelines Limited vs Beeru Bibi

Ad Beeru Bibi w/o Khair Din, resident of Street# 4, Shoorah Kothi, Mohallah Choi Garan, tehsil and district Sheikhpura.

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