

ELSEWHERE



Sirisena vows to veto military deal with U.S.

COLOMBO
Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena on Saturday announced that he will not allow his government to conclude a proposed military deal that would allow U.S. troops free access to the island's ports. Mr. Sirisena said he was opposed to the draft Status of Forces Agreement that the two countries are negotiating to further strengthen their military ties. **AFP**

Indian-origin officer sues Scotland Yard

LONDON
One of Britain's senior-most Indian-origin women police officers Parm Sandhu is taking legal action against Scotland Yard over allegations of racial and gender discrimination within the U.K.'s largest police force. Ms. Sandhu claimed that she was denied promotions and opportunities at work due to her race and gender. **PTI**

North Korea accuses Australian student Alek Sigley of spying

He was detained for promoting propaganda against the country, says Pyongyang

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
SEOUL

An Australian student who was released after being held in North Korea had been "spying" in the reclusive country, state media said on Saturday. Alek Sigley, 29, disappeared around two weeks ago prompting deep concern about his fate, but was freed and flew to Japan on Thursday.

Official North Korean news agency KCNA said Mr. Sigley had admitted that "he had been spying by collecting our internal information and sharing with others and repeatedly asked for our forgiveness for infringing on our sovereignty".

Detained on June 25

It said Mr. Sigley — one of just a handful of Westerners living and studying in North Korea — had been detained on June 25 for promoting propaganda against the country online, including on specialist website NK News,



Freed from detention: Alek Sigley at the Beijing International Airport following his release on Thursday. **AP**

which rejected the accusations.

"Sigley, upon request by anti-DPRK news outlets such as NK News, on numerous occasions transferred information that he gathered while travelling to every corner of Pyongyang using his status as an international student, including photographs and analysis," it said.

"The government of DPRK has exercised humanitarian forbearance and deported him... on July 4."

Mr. Sigley's detention came just days before a G20 summit and a landmark meeting between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

Mr. Sigley organised tours to North Korea, and ran a

number of social media sites, which usually had a stream of apolitical content about life in the country.

Returning to normal life

On Friday, Mr. Sigley said he was planning to "return to normal life" but offered no details of his detention, adding he would not be conducting any interviews or holding a press conference.

"I just want everyone to know I am OK, and to thank them for their concern for my well-being and their support for my family over the past week," he said in a statement.

However Mr. Sigley gave no indication of why he was held, how he was treated or why he was released. It said he would not make any further comment "at this time or later".

Also on Friday, Australia's Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton cautioned Mr. Sigley against returning to Pyongyang.

China cites India's role in reviving economic corridor

Xi, Hasina seek to 'work together' with India to spur BCIM

ATUL ANEJA
BEIJING

After flagging last month the revival of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) during talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Kyrgyzstan's capital of Bishkek, Chinese President Xi Jinping joined visiting Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina to accelerate the project with New Delhi's support.

A statement on the Chinese Foreign Ministry's website on Ms. Hasina's talks with President Xi on Friday said the Prime Minister pledged to "promote the construction" of the BCIM Economic Corridor.

On Thursday, Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang advocated that Beijing and Dhaka should "work together to build the BCIM-EC, in a bid to connect the market covering nearly 3 billion people..."

SCO meet with Modi

The revival of Chinese interest in the BCIM-EC in coordination with India was evident when Mr. Xi singled out the project as an example of expanding the India-China ties following last month's talks with Mr. Modi on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Bishkek.

In tune with China's intent to engage with India to spur the BCIM-EC, President Xi and Prime Minister Hasina acknowledged that "the initiative would have to be revived working together with India", the United News of Bangladesh (UNB) reported.

After the Wuhan summit last year, China has been advocating "China-India Plus" cooperation, aimed at



Joint approach: Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing. **REUTERS**

adopting a joint approach towards some of the major issues in the region, including the Rohingya refugee crisis and possible initiatives in Nepal, Afghanistan and Iran.

During talks with Ms. Hasina, the Chinese side appeared to demonstrate an urgency to tackle the Rohingya crisis on Dhaka's request.

"We'll contact Myanmar political leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi, to solve the Rohingya problem amicably and so that the repatriation of the first batch of the Rohingya starts as soon as possible," the UNB quoted Song Tao, Minister of the International Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC), as saying, following his meeting with Ms. Hasina.

Financing of projects

China's decision to adopt a consultative approach with its BRI partners, including on the financing of specific projects, as announced during this year's Belt and Road Forum (BRF), echoed in Ms. Hasina's talks with the Chi-

nese leadership.

According to media reports from Bangladesh, Ms. Hasina requested Mr. Xi to ease the terms and condition of loan agreements, which were signed during his visit to Dhaka in 2016.

Dhaka's concerns

Ms. Hasina also sought Chinese investments, with buy-back arrangements, in the 100 economic zones that were slated to be opened up in the country, along with addressing the issue of trade imbalance between Bangladesh and the world's second largest economy.

Mr. Xi promised to take concrete steps to assuage Dhaka's concerns, echoing his remarks at the BRF that the financial model for funding BRI projects had been revamped, countering criticism that its mega-connectivity undertaking was opening "debt traps" for enhancing its geopolitical influence.

The Chinese President also sought Bangladesh's support for building a "digital silk road".

14 civilians killed as mortar shells hit Afghan market

Taliban hand suspected; official says militants were trying to hit Army checkpoint in Khwaja Sabz Posh

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
KABUL

At least 14 people were killed and dozens more wounded when a busy market in northern Afghanistan was hit by mortar fire, officials said on Saturday.

Several Taliban shells hit the market on Friday morning in the Khwaja Sabz Posh district of Faryab province, according to Hanif Rezaee, an Afghan Army spokesman. "Fourteen civilians were killed and 40 — including wo-

men and children — were wounded," said Mr. Rezaee. He said the Taliban had been trying to hit an Army checkpoint near the market. The insurgent group did not immediately comment. Naem Musamim, Faryab's health director, said 14 bodies and 39 wounded people, including four children, had been taken to local hospitals.

Also on Friday, a bomb detonated inside a Shia mosque in Ghazni city in central Afghanistan, killing two wor-

shippers and wounding 20 more, according to Ghazni Governor spokesman Aref Noori. On Twitter, the Taliban denied involvement in the attack. The Islamic State group's Afghan affiliate has conducted frequent prior attacks on Shia targets.

'Talks were productive'

Meanwhile, special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad said on Saturday that the seventh round of peace talks between the and Taliban that

are ongoing in Qatar are the "most productive" so far. "[W]e made progress on all the issues that we have been discussing," he said. Suhail Shaheen, the spokesman for the Taliban's office in Qatar, said they were pleased with the discussions. "We are happy with progress and hope the rest of the work is also done. We have not faced any obstacles yet," he tweeted.

But the talks are set to be paused for two days while another summit with Afghan

representatives takes place in Qatar's capital. "Tomorrow and the day after, because of the intra-Afghan conference, no talks will take place," Mr. Shaheen said.

About 60 Afghan delegates are expected to attend Sunday's intra-Afghan dialogue.

The Taliban, who have steadfastly refused to negotiate with the government, have stressed that those attending the talks will only do so in a "personal capacity".

Multiple buildings damaged as powerful quake hits California

U.S. State records its most powerful earthquake since 1999

REUTERS
LOS ANGELES

A magnitude 7.1 earthquake shook Southern California on Friday, triggering fires, buckling part of a highway, damaging buildings but causing few reported injuries despite striking with eight times more force than the initial quake in the same area a day earlier.

The quake struck at about 8.20 p.m. near the town of Ridgecrest south of Death Valley National Park, about 202 km northeast of Los Angeles, according to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS).

16 aftershocks

It was followed by at least 16 aftershocks of magnitude four or above, the USGS said, which also warned of a 50% or better chance of another magnitude 6 quake in the days ahead. "We've got fires, we've got gas leaks, we've got injuries, we've got



Shaken and rattled: One of the mobile homes affected by Friday's earthquake in Ridgecrest, California. **AP**

people without power," said Ridgecrest Mayor Peggy Breeden. "We're dealing with it as best we can."

Ridgecrest Police chief Jed McLaughlin said so far only minor injuries had been reported.

Friday's quake was the most powerful to hit Southern California since another 7.1 trembler struck the Mojave Desert near the Twenty-nine Palms Marine Corps Base in 1999, said Lucy Jones, a seismologist for the

California Institute of Technology.

California Governor Gavin Newsom has requested federal assistance and has put the Office of Emergency Services on highest alert.

A swarm of aftershocks have jolted the high desert region of Southern California since a 6.4 quake on Thursday morning near Ridgecrest.

Mr. Jones said that quake turned out to be a foreshock to Friday's 7.1 tremor.

Erdoğan sacks central bank Governor

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
ANKARA

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has sacked the Governor of Turkey's central bank and replaced him with his Deputy, a presidential decree said on Saturday, after months of tension with the government over high interest rates.

Murat Çetinkaya, who was appointed to the role in April 2016, has been replaced by Murat Uysal, according to the decree published in the official gazette, which gave no official reason for the change. There had been recent speculation that Mr. Çetinkaya could be replaced amid disagreements with the government on cutting interest rates.

Turkey's main interest rate is 24% after the bank under Mr. Çetinkaya made an aggressive rate hike of 625 basis points last September following a currency crisis in August.

Yangon sees protests over rape of toddler

A man was charged earlier this month

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
YANGON

Thousands of protesters marched in Yangon on Saturday as outrage over the rape of a two-year-old spilled onto the streets following a viral online campaign in a case that has left Myanmar society reeling.

The assault took place in May in Myanmar's capital Naypyidaw but a public campaign escalated last week after the girl's father spoke to local media, venting his anger about the inquiry's progress. On Saturday in Yangon, demonstrators descended on the police's Criminal Investigation Department.

One man was arrested on



A protest in Yangon on Saturday demanding justice for the girl. **AP**

Wednesday and charged with the attack, although there is public scepticism over whether the authorities have the right person.

Child rights experts at NGO Terre des Hommes said child rape is "very common" in Myanmar.

Iran hints that it could enrich uranium to 5%

The nuclear deal caps it at 3.67%

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
TEHRAN

A top adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader has hinted that Tehran could boost its uranium enrichment to 5% for "peaceful" aims, ahead of deadline it set for world powers to save a landmark 2015 nuclear deal.

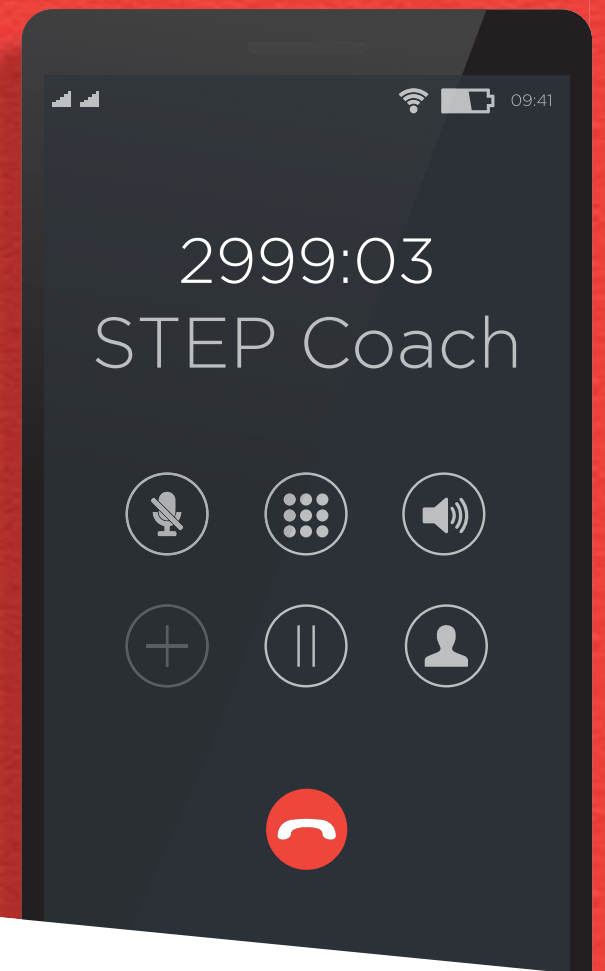
Iran is acting on its May 8 threat to suspend parts of the agreement in response to U.S. President Donald Trump's re-imposition of sanctions. The accord capped Iran's enrichment maximum at 3.67%.

Uranium enrichment "will increase as much as needed for our peaceful activities," Ali Akbar Velayati, international affairs adviser

to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said on Friday. "For Bushehr nuclear reactor, we need 5% enrichment and it is a completely peaceful goal," he added. Bushehr is Iran's only nuclear power station and is currently running on imported fuel from Russia that is closely monitored by the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency.

On May 8, Iran announced it would no longer respect the limits set on the size of its stockpiles of enriched uranium and heavy water, and threatened to abandon further commitments, including exceeding the agreed uranium enrichment maximum from July 7.

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